

# **Essex Governance Group Final Report**

February, 2015

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# **1. Essex Governance Group (EGG) Report: Executive Summary**

*In fall, 2014, the Essex Government Group explored with residents ways Essex can continue to improve civic engagement and governance, with a focus on budget decision-making and voting. Through a community-wide survey and public forum, EGG identified a number of strong themes. EGG findings and recommendations are briefly summarized below. For more information please go to [www.heartandsoul.org](http://www.heartandsoul.org)*

## **EGG FINDINGS**

### **1. More Effective Communication is Needed**

Citizens want Essex leaders and staff to communicate with them in ways that are more:

- Explicit, clear, and honest
- Proactive, with information well in advance of decisions
- Online, with a more active web presence
- Innovative in using a variety of media
- Direct, responsive, and accountable
- Two-way, with respectful exchanges

### **2. Inclusion is Critical**

Citizens are concerned about low turn-out both at town meeting and local ballot voting. Many reported feeling barriers to participation.

### **3. High-Quality, Informed Decision Making is Greatly Valued**

Citizens value face-to-face decision making. They appreciate hearing directly from leaders, and want the community to be informed and engaged.

### **4. Essex Could Create its Own Model**

Participants in EGG forum and survey are open to creating a new model for local democratic decision making, choosing the elements that work best for Essex.

### **5. Residents Value the Power and Immediacy of Direct Democracy**

Citizens value their power at town meeting, and want to be able to see the clear, immediate results of their participation.

### **6. Same Day Voting, and a Call for Simplicity**

Each spring, Town residents vote three separate times (Village residents five times). Citizens would like all votes on local issues to occur on the same day.

## **EGG RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **A. Launch Proactive Communication Program**

Adopt an Essex Public Engagement Protocol, train and affirm expectations of staff, revamp website, and host informal community meetings.

### **B. Empower Neighborhoods**

Create Neighborhood Assemblies to serve as official advisors to the municipality.

### **C. Switch to Enhanced Town Meeting / Australian Ballot Hybrid**

Enhance Town Meeting with improved participation options. Citizens would continue to have the power to amend the budget unless Town Meeting attendance is below a specific level. The final budget would be voted by Australian ballot 45 days after Town Meeting. Additional changes: ballot would include a survey for citizen comment; Town Meeting date would be changed so as not to coincide with school break.

### **D. Institute Same-Day Voting**

Create a staged plan to combine voting dates, and combine Town/Village Meeting dates.

## **2. Introduction**

### **Essex Governance Group: How We Got Here**

The Essex Governance Group (EGG) is a project supported by the Town of Essex, Heart & Soul of Essex, and the Orton Family Foundation.

The project was initiated in summer, 2014, when a group of residents concerned about low turnout at Town and Village annual meetings approached the Town Selectboard and Village Trustees about moving budget approval from the traditional Town/Village Meeting format to Australian ballot (ballot-box voting). This group, calling itself “Budget to Ballot” (B2B) pointed out that median voter turnout at Town Meeting since 2005 is 1.5% of registered voters (it’s 1.9% for Village Meeting). Median voter turnout for Australian ballot voting after Town Meeting during this same period was 8.9% (8.3% for the Village). The group requested that the Selectboard help Essex move toward a combined town meeting/Australian ballot system (with a proposed budget figure determined at town meeting, and final approval of budget decided by Australian ballot), and that the Towns’ ballot voting and the three Town-related school budget votes all occur on the same date.

Both the Selectboard and the Trustees agreed that the issues raised by B2B were important, and that’s when Heart & Soul of Essex was brought on board.

Heart & Soul of Essex, a multi-year community effort supported by the Orton Family Foundation, has the goals of engaging community members in dialogue, creating a vision based on what people are saying, and activating community members to take action towards that vision. During Essex’s two-year Heart & Soul community planning process, “Community Connections” emerged as one of six core values of Essex. Heart and Soul participants have extensive experience convening community conversations, and agreed to help engage the community on this question. With funding from the Town of Essex, Heart & Soul of Essex and the Orton Family Foundation, facilitators Susan Clark and Susan McCormack were hired to co-facilitate the effort.

Heart & Soul members joined with members of the B2B group, town and village officials, and interested residents to carry out this work. The newly formed Essex Governance Group (EGG) met throughout the fall to plan and implement a community exploration about decision-making and voting on the budget in Essex. The exploration included a community-wide survey and forum. This report summarizes the results of those efforts.

## **EGG Report Scope**

EGG's findings and recommendations are offered with the understanding of the report's scope and limitations.

- *Time Frame:* The group was charged with completing its work within a four-month time-frame, including planning and carrying out the group's goals and activities, and processing and reporting findings. Limitations of both time and staffing necessarily circumscribed the project's scope.
- *Research Tools:* The EGG Survey and Forum participants were self-selected and likely represented more highly engaged citizens (from all perspectives). While the Survey Monkey tool protects against multiple responses from the same computer, there is no way of knowing whether anyone repeated the survey using multiple devices. Not surprisingly, the online Survey had over seven times the participation of the Forum (450 compared with approximately 60). Even given these limitations, the thoughtful comments recorded through both the Survey and Forum reveal important patterns and offer valuable insights about residents' concerns.
- *Town and Village:* In most cases, the EGG research did not differentiate between citizens' experience in the Town and the Village. While some survey comments reflected specific feelings about Town and Village governance, most data was collected about "Essex" in general.
- *Citizen Focus:* Just as the 6/2014 Morris and Carr "Shared Services" Assessment focused on an internal (staff) perspective, EGG's work focused on Essex residents at large. EGG benefitted from active participation by the Selectboard, Village Trustees and even one School Board member, and the facilitators were also grateful for valuable interviews with the Town/Village Manager, Assistant Manager, and Town Clerk. While the EGG project did not have the capacity to conduct interviews with additional Town and Village staff, this report is offered with appreciation for the knowledge and professionalism of both the Town and Village staff. We hope that through its emphasis on citizen collaboration, this report will support and enhance their important work.
- *Process:* EGG participants agreed on a decision-making protocol, and decisions were made by this protocol. Given their busy lives, not all participants were able to attend all meetings; however, all meetings were reported via email so those who could not attend could weigh in on decisions. The EGG report is the best representation of the group's consensus the facilitators could create given these limitations.

### **3. Context: “What Time Is It”?**

Bill Grace of the Center for Ethical Leadership notes that when working for positive change, it is important to ask “What time is it?” What is the context in which we find ourselves, and what factors will affect our work?

#### **What time is it in American communities?**

The big picture is important. Across the U.S., in the aftermath of the “Great Recession,” citizens are struggling economically. Simultaneously they are also struggling democratically, with public confidence in government hitting all-time lows. As federal programs are cut, communities are trying to determine how to do more with less—less money, and less of the citizen confidence they’ve long relied on.

At the same time, citizens’ expectations about decision-making are rapidly changing. Today’s citizens are web-savvy, and possess an extraordinary ability to research issues and self-organize more effectively than at any point in history. The Internet and the “Open Source Revolution” have created dramatic changes in both the business and non-profit worlds, and citizens are now developing a different view of leadership in the public sphere as well. Reliance on “experts” is giving way to decentralized, bottom-up strategies that reward innovation and information sharing. Increasingly, citizens expect to be treated as collaborators, and appreciate systems that look less like a hierarchy and more like a wiki.

The answer emerging in many communities—and now being brought forward as “best practice” by leaders in public administration—is to use creative methods for engaging citizens in decision making.

The National League of Cities represents 19,000 cities, towns and villages across the U.S.; at its recent annual conference, fully one-third of its “Leadership Training” workshops involved “public engagement.” The International City/County Management Association conference recently featured an entire track on “engaging citizens,” and a third of their university workshops related to public engagement. And at the 2012 American Society for Public Administration conference, the major gathering of all public administration schools in the country, the conference theme was “Redefining Public Service through Civic Engagement.”

Through a combination of process tools (outreach, more creative meeting structures, targeted power sharing, etc.) and technical tools (online communication, increased access to information), communities are redefining their local democracy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Essex, like every other community, must find the unique recipe that suits it best.

## What time is it in Essex?

Essex finds itself in a time of significant change. EGG members created a list of some of the activities affecting citizens in Essex—some positive, some deeply challenging.

- **Shared Services:** The 6/2014 Morris & Carr Shared Services Report suggested a number of significant changes to the way the Town and Village work. Town and Village leaders and staff are working hard to take appropriate action, most immediately in the area of Public Works. Meanwhile, some citizens are expressing concerns about what the changes will mean (“is it a pseudo-merger?”). They wonder how to have a voice in the process.
- **Budget Hits:** The 2010 Census showed that incomes in some neighborhoods dropped 10%, and many Essex residents are expressing concerns about taxes and the cost of living. At the same time, Essex Rescue, the VNA and Winooski Valley Park District are just a few of the organizations likely to ask for increased financial support from the community.
- **Significant development:** Residents will experience the complications of construction in the next several years including the Crescent Connector (federal project), repaving Route 15 (state project), bike lane/sidewalk expansion on Pearl Street, and a new bike path by the train station. The Town has set aside \$1.5 million to renovate 81 Main Street. In the private sector, there will be construction of a major new building at 5 Corners, and new housing developments happening outside the Village with implications for traffic, town character open space, schools, etc.
- **School system concerns:** Like other Vermont communities, Essex is facing changing demographics and rising per-pupil costs. A study of consolidated governance is being discussed.
- **IBM / Global Foundries:** Residents are waiting to see what changes may occur with the shift in this major local employer.
- **Planning:** Village officials, with assistance of Heart & Soul of Essex and urban designer Julie Campoli, are carrying out “Design Five Corners,” a strategic planning effort to enhance the physical quality and economic vitality of Essex Junction’s Village Core.
- **Heart & Soul:** The Essex Heart & Soul process recently wrapped up its two-year visioning process. Essex has an immediate opportunity to build on this work, as well as take advantage of the citizen-facilitators trained through Heart & Soul. The Heart & Soul Board and participants are working to maintain momentum, and determine how best to implement the vision that Essex residents communicated.

- **Community Calendar:** One of the newest projects of Heart & Soul is an online centralized calendar of all community events. Ideally this will help all sectors plan and communicate more effectively. [www.essexcalendar.org](http://www.essexcalendar.org)

It is in this complex environment that the Essex Governance Group launched its work.

## **4) Essex Governance Group: Purpose and Process**

Essex Governance Group participants determined the following priorities:

### **EGG Purpose**

Engage people in a conversation about ways Essex can continue to improve civic engagement and governance.

### **EGG Goals**

1. LEARN what motivates and/or prevents people from participating
2. INFORM people about Essex's current governance system
3. GATHER ideas from people about potential improvements
3. CREATE a set of recommendations to help the community improve governance and increase civic participation

### **EGG Scope / Focus**

- Form of town meeting & village meeting (e.g. traditional floor meeting, representative town meeting, hybrid, etc.)
- Voting options for town and village budgets and other issues (e.g. floor vote, Australian ballot)
- Ways to increase informed civic engagement in town

Note: The group agreed that while the following topics may arise in our discussions and we must understand the relationship between these and our work, the group would *not* focus on:

- Town-Village merger
- School governance and funding structure
- Forms of governance outside of town/village structure (city, etc.)

### **EGG Timeline**

1. Convene organizing committee - August 2014
2. Planning - June through early September 2014
3. Outreach - August thru October 2014
4. Conversation - late October 2014
5. Synthesis - November 2014
6. Report due - end of year 2014

### **EGG Proposed Outcomes**

1. Deepen citizen engagement and understanding around governance
2. Activate citizens to participate in the civic life of Essex
3. Identify top priorities for improvements in governance and/or civic participation
4. Report back to the community (elected officials and the public) with a set of recommendations for improving governance and/or civic participation in Essex

## **EGG Research**

In order to help the community have an informed discussion, and for use by the Town/Village on their websites and other citizen education, EGG participants researched the following:

1. Voting statistics
  - Essex voting rates for national elections vs. other VT communities
  - Percentage of voters who vote in local ballot-box elections in Essex vs. comparable places
  - Essex voting on national issues vs. local Australian ballot voting
2. Essex Voting schedule
3. Structure of municipal bodies in town/village/school systems
4. Budget overview
5. Citizen opportunities to participate in decision-making
6. A Brief History of Essex's Government (why it's set up with Village, Town)
7. Discussion materials on Town Meeting, Australian Ballot, Representative Town Meeting, NH hybrid system

## **Outreach Tools**

### ***1. Community-Wide Survey***

EGG issued an online survey during October. Over 450 residents of Essex Town and Village participated in the survey, and provided a great deal of information about current voting and civic engagement.

Survey Goals:

- Learn what motivates and prevents people from participating
- Assess people's level of interest in governance issues
- Identify community values/priorities regarding governance and civic participation

### ***2. Community Forum***

On Saturday, November 8 EGG hosted an interactive "Essex Governance and You" community forum (noon-4:00). It was attended by about 60 leaders and residents from both the Town and Village.

*Forum Goals:*

- Share and discuss the results of the community survey

- Identify key priorities and generate suggestions to strengthen civic participation/community voice
- Inform people about Essex's current governance model and share stories about other governance models
- Gather feedback about potential governance changes

*Forum Process:* Led by facilitators Susan Clark and Susan McCormack, the Forum was a chance for EGG members to share and discuss the results of the survey with the community. Forum participants also learned about current governance in the Town and the Village, and then spent time weighing the benefits and challenges of four different voting methods: Town Meeting and Australian Ballot, which are currently in use in Essex; Representative Town Meeting, which is used in Brattleboro, VT and in Massachusetts; and a Meeting-Ballot Hybrid approach used in New Hampshire ("SB2"). (See Appendix "Four Approaches" document.) After working in small groups, the participants came together and shared their favorite ideas for encouraging more citizen participation in local voting. Based on the survey results, they also brainstormed ways to build on Essex's high level of community mindedness, and ways to increase transparency in municipal government.

## 5) Essex Democracy: Data and Infographics

The Essex Governance Group asked itself, “What do people need to know in order to have a productive conversation about Essex governance?” Below are highlights from the Nov. 8 “Essex Democracy and You” forum presentation answering this question.

*“If you want to understand today, you have to search yesterday.”* Pearl Buck

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF ESSEX TOWN AND ESSEX JUNCTION....

#### HOW WE CAME TO BE.



June 7, 1763—Town of Essex, a 36 square mile area, was chartered by Gov. Wentworth of NH Province by power granted to him by King George III.



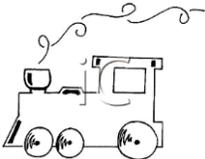
1783—Permanent settlement in Essex began.



1786—First Town Meeting with a population of 772 (26 families). Citizens voted to create a tax to repair the roads.



1801—School districts formed; Village area named School District #1 (aka “Hubbells Falls School District”)

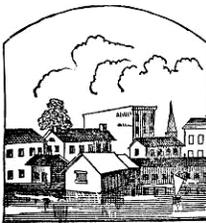


1850— Railroad arrived, known as Painesville (named in honor of Gov. Paine), which subsequently created greater population density.



1853—Vermont Central Railroad and Vermont/Canada Railroad “junctioned” its lines.

1862—Railroad station officially re-named Essex Junction



1893 - School District #1 (area of 4.6 sq. miles around the train station) added another layer of government, in addition to the Town government, by legislative approval known as the Village of Essex Junction for “voluntary taxation with added necessary services of a densely populated area” (Frank Bent, 1963). Owners of less developed farmland did not have to pay for the services they didn’t need. This taxation structure has been in place ever since.

(Fig. 1)

## History and Demographics

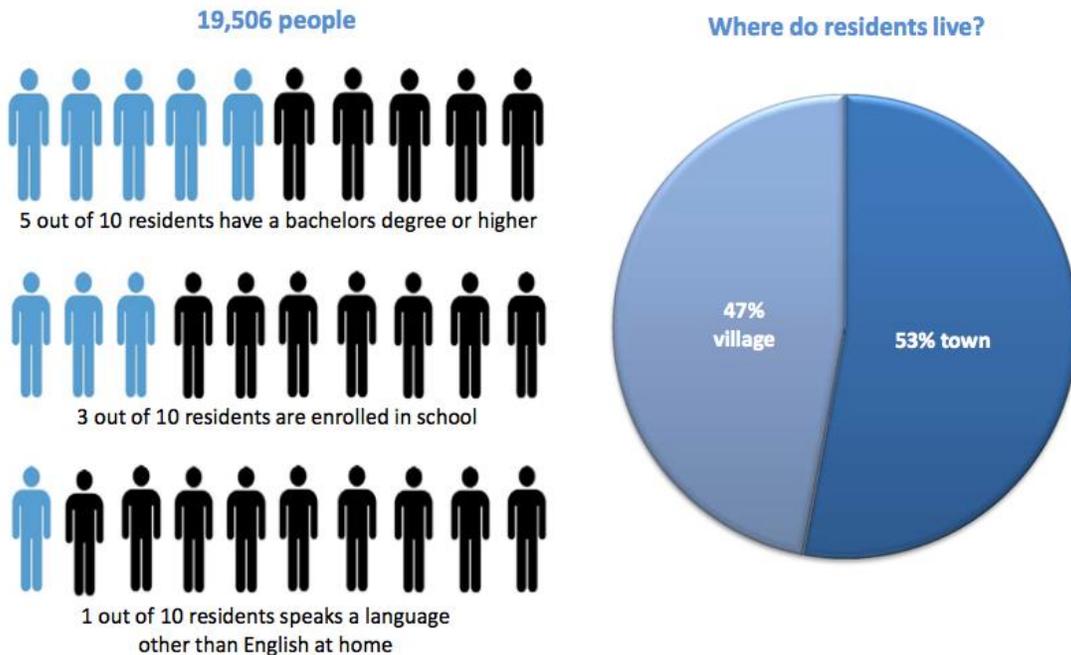
We began with the basics, offering a brief history of the Town/Village relationship (Fig. 1, above). We also included a map of Essex that indicated the boundaries of the Village and Town, reminding participants that people who are residents of the Village are also residents of the Town.

Essex's population is now close to 20,000, with a well-educated and increasingly diverse citizenry split almost evenly between Village and Town (Fig. 2, below).

# WE ARE ESSEX



ESSEX IS THE STATE'S 2<sup>nd</sup> LARGEST TOWN AND IS MORE EDUCATED AND DIVERSE THAN VT AS A WHOLE.



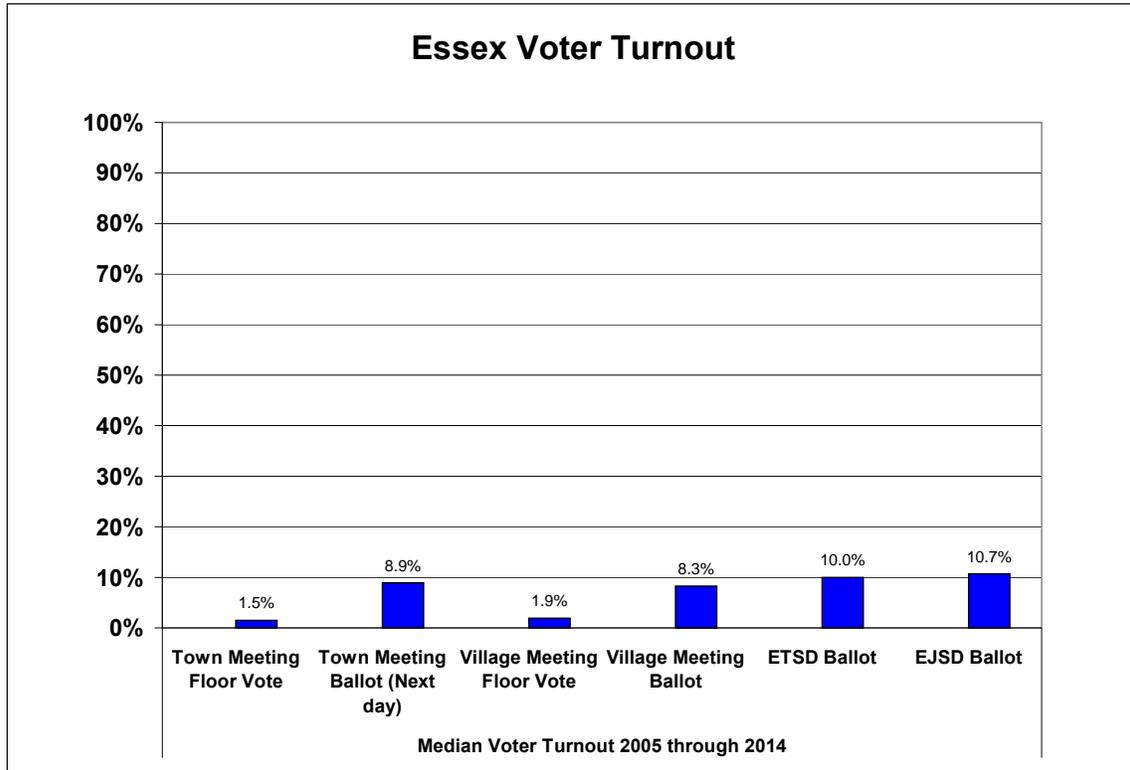
(Fig. 2).

## Town Meeting and Ballot-Box Voting

Figure 3 (below) shows the range of Essex voter turn-out on local issues.

- Essex's votes on the Town and Village budgets occur at town meeting, face-to-face deliberative gatherings. The median voter turnout for the Town Meeting between 2006-2014 was 1.5%. At the Village Meeting, the median turnout was 1.9%.

- Essex also votes on some Town and Village issues by Australian ballot. The median voter turnout between 2006-2014 for these ballot-box votes was 8.9% (Town) and 8.3% (Village).
- Essex votes on school budgets by Australian ballot. The median voter turnout between 2006-2014 for these ballot-box votes was 10% (Essex Town School District) and 10.7% (Essex Junction School District).



(Fig. 3)

### Essex's Numbers in Perspective

It is important to look at Essex's voting data in perspective.

- Even in the important and exhaustively publicized U.S. presidential elections, across the country voter turnout hovers at about 55% of eligible voters. Meanwhile, turnout is even lower on local issues: in elections for city council, mayors, and local bond issues across the country, participation seldom exceeds 25%, and is often dramatically lower—in the single digits.

- Research on Vermont's traditional, face-to-face town meetings (see *Real Democracy* by Frank Bryan) reveals two key facts about town meeting attendance, both of which are relevant to Essex:

**Size matters.** Vermont is the second most rural state in the nation, with well over half of its population living in towns of under 2,500. In small towns, town meeting attendance often reaches 30% or higher. However, across Vermont, town meeting consistently achieves higher per capita turnout in small towns than large ones. Recent data from meetings held between 1999–2011 shows town meeting attendance statewide averaged 13.1 percent, and analysis shows that increasing town size accounts for over half of the decline in town meeting attendance since 1970.

Essex is the largest town in Vermont still to govern through a traditional floor meeting.

**Issues matter.** The “Essex Voter Turnout” chart shows median attendance, which means that half the meetings have above this attendance, half below. Median (rather than mean) attendance is helpful because it doesn’t skew the number by averaging in unusual highs or lows in attendance. However, it is important to note that like every other town, Essex does see spikes in attendance.

For instance, in 2010 in the Village, attendance more than doubled with 4.2% coming out for that meeting. In 2005, the Essex Town School District ballot box voting spiked to 16.5% and the Essex Jct. School District had over a 24% turnout. In 2008, almost 53% of the Towns’ registered voters turned out to vote on the Town Meeting ballot. If Essex follows the patterns of other Vermont towns, then it was a controversial or especially interesting or compelling issue that drew the larger number of voters to participate. This is useful information when considering how to improve public engagement.

### **How does Essex’s turnout compare with other towns?**

Fig. 4 (below) shows that Essex voter turnout for *national elections* in November compares favorably with that of other cities and towns in the area.

In contrast, Fig 5 shows Essex’s ballot-box voting on *local issues* compared with other Vermont towns. Knowing that population can affect participation, EGG chose the largest communities in Vermont for comparative data. The Chittenden County town of Shelburne (18<sup>th</sup> largest) is also included for comparison.

As this chart shows, Essex’s ballot box voting on local issues is comparatively low. This seems to indicate that Essex’s town meeting attendance is not the only issue. Even when voting by ballot, Essex has room for improvement in engaging citizens in local issues.

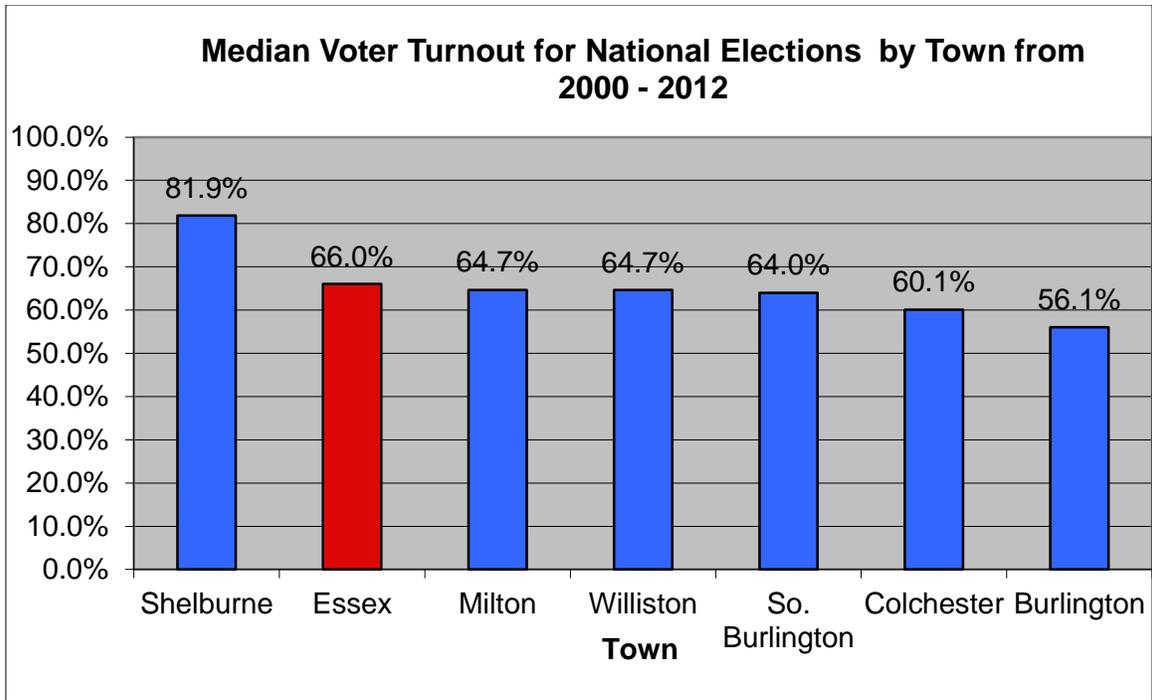


Fig. 4

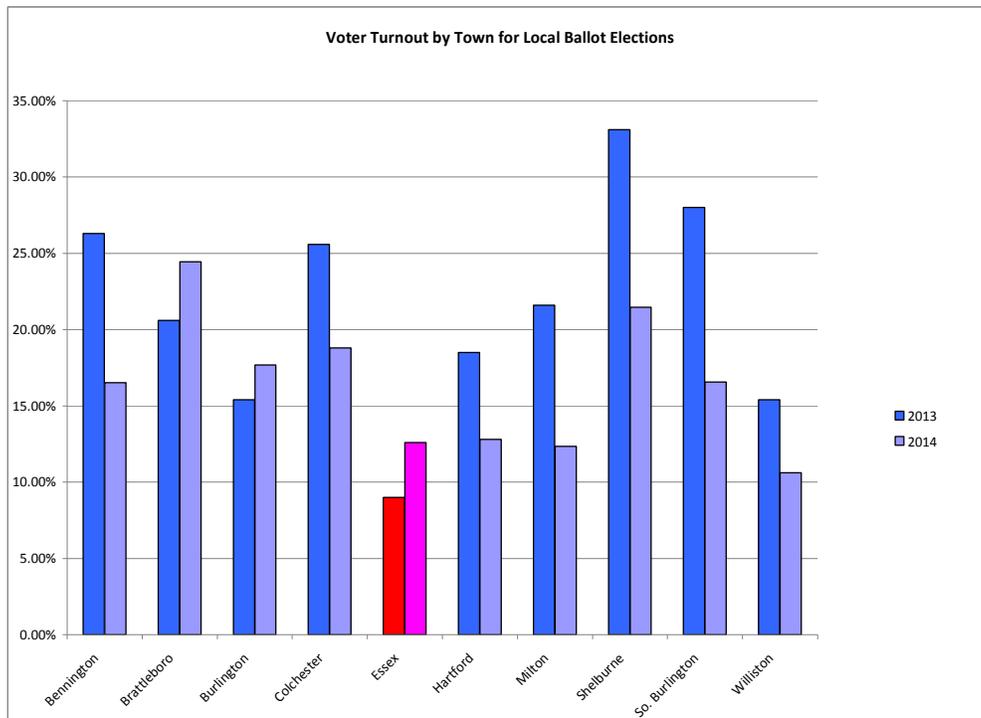


Fig. 5

## The Role of the Essex Voter in Local Budget Decisions

Figure 6 (below) shows the two key roles for Essex voters in local budget decision:

- Electing the Selectboard and Village Trustees, who, in their executive branch roles, work with the staff to propose a budget; and
- Deliberating on, potentially amending, and voting on the budget at Town or Village Meeting. In this role citizens are, on issues of governance and finance, the legislative branch of local government.

In addition, citizens can participate in a range of ways including serving on committees, attending public meetings, and contacting local officials.

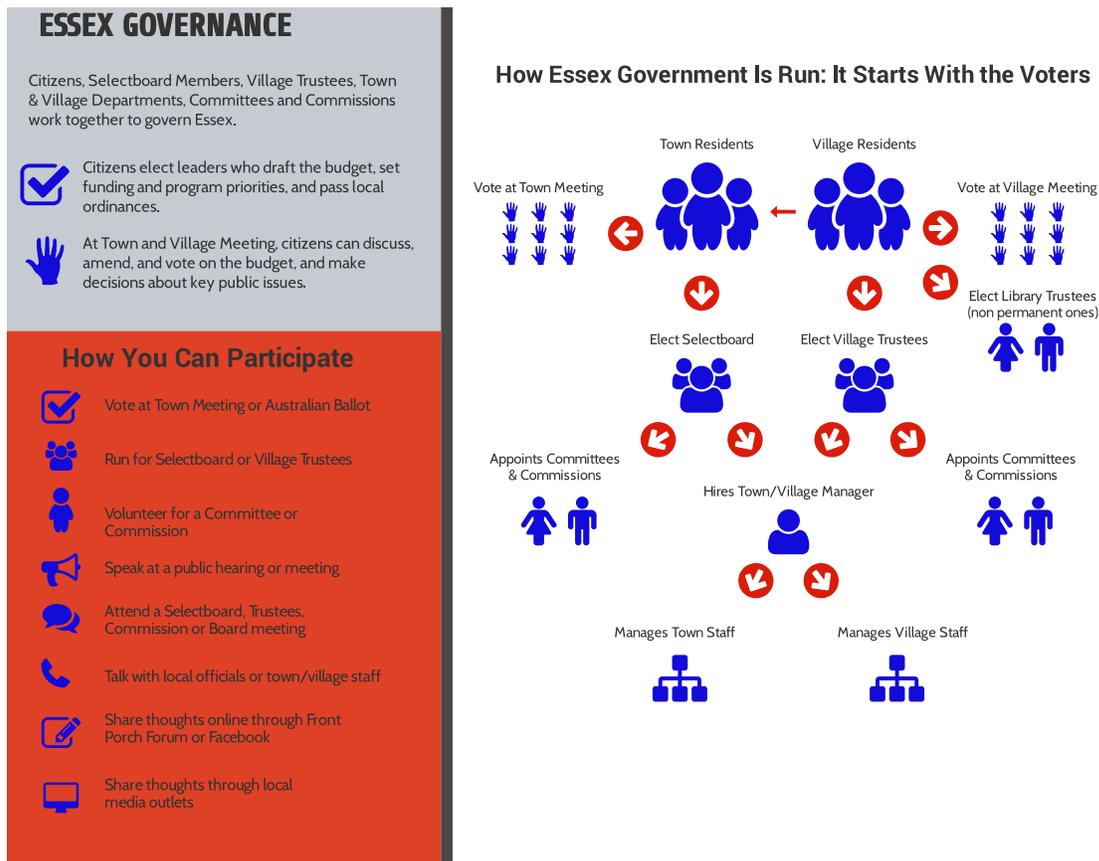


Fig. 6

Figure 7 (below) offers additional information on Essex voting. Of particular note, Essex has an unusually high number of local votes each spring. Including Town Meeting and Village Meeting, Essex residents currently vote on five separate budgets: Town Municipal; Village Municipal; Village Schools (K-8); Town Schools (K-8); and Essex High School and Center for Technology–Essex (9-12)—a total of three votes for Town residents, five for Village residents.

Essex votes on over 80% of local spending by ballot.

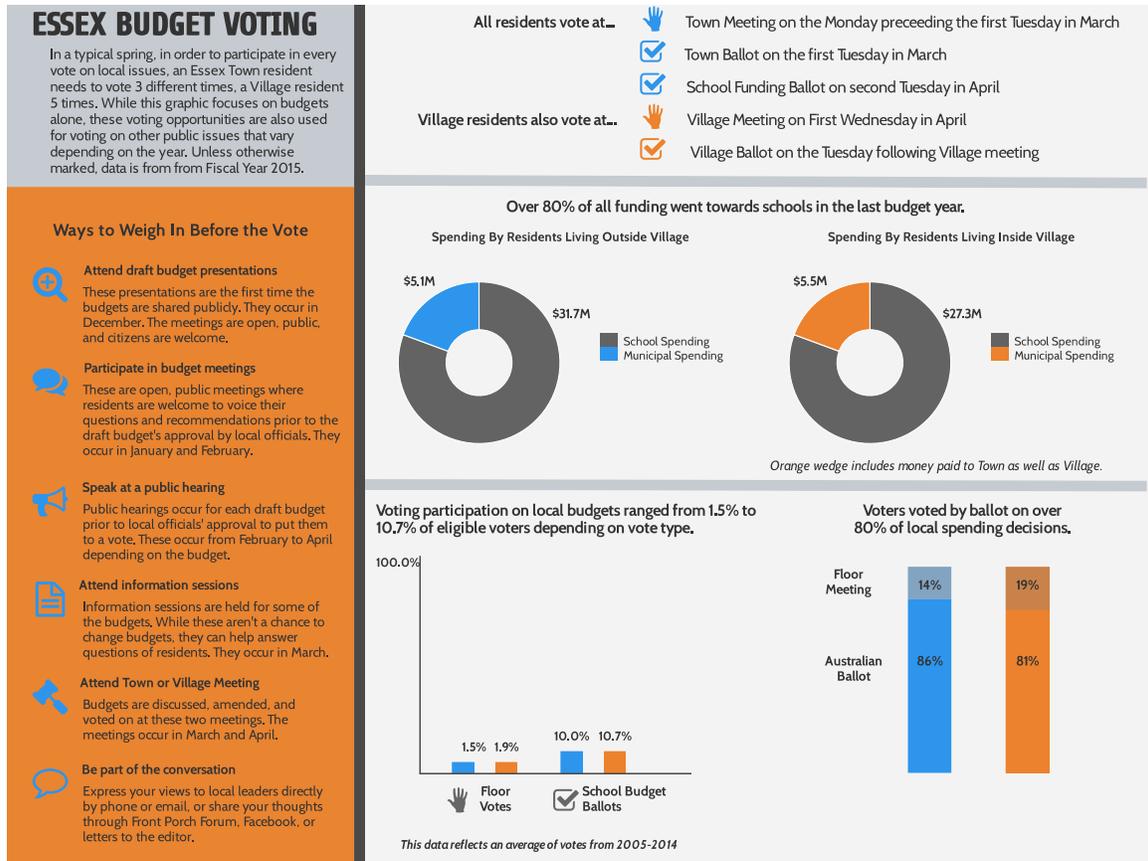


Fig. 7

Does Essex’s system present any barriers to voting and participation? To learn what motivates and prevents people from participating, assess people’s level of interest in governance issues, and to identify community priorities regarding governance and civic participation, EGG launched a community-wide survey about local democracy.

## 6) EGG Survey

### Survey Highlights

1. Over 450 Essex residents answered the survey.
2. Results indicate that respondents participate in our community and feel local decisions are important.
3. Even among this engaged group, many don't attend town meeting or vote in local elections.
4. Respondents identified several barriers to participating.
5. Several strong themes emerged, including the desire for more collaboration, transparency and inclusion.

Figure 8 depicts key findings from the EGG Survey.

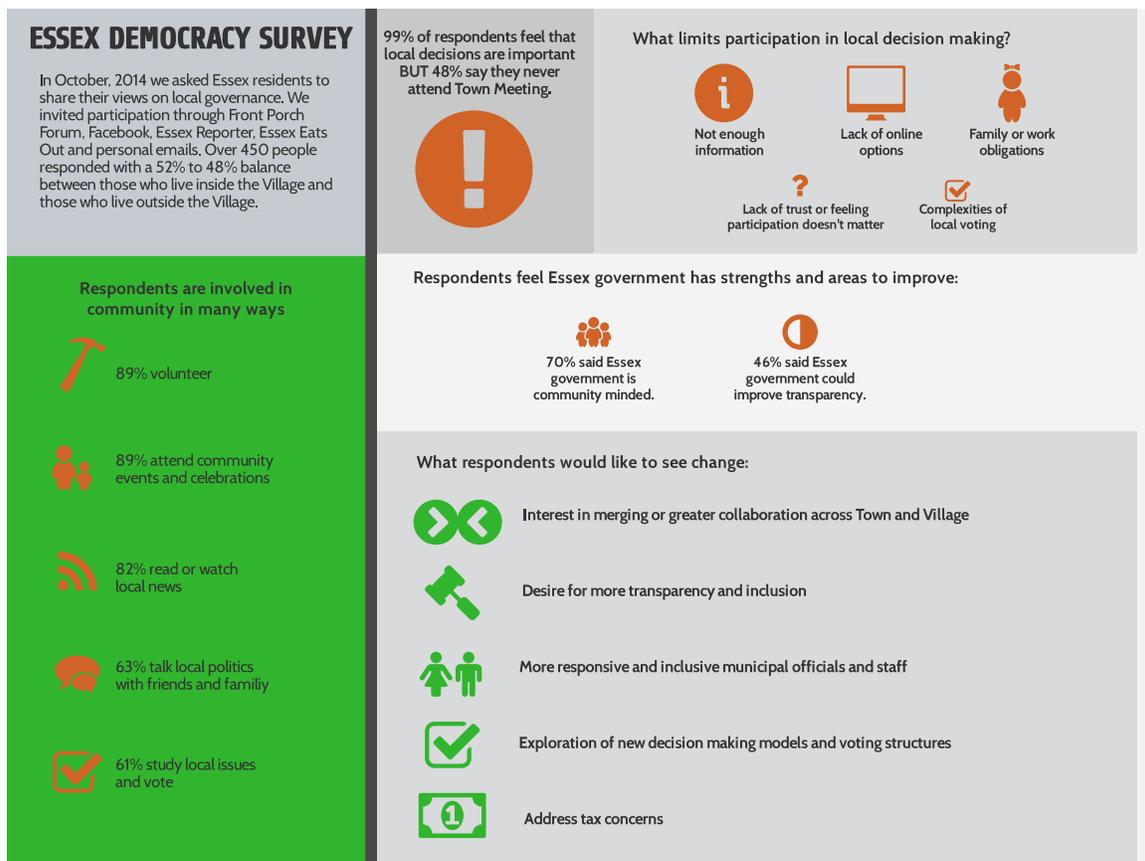


Fig. 8

## Detailed Survey Findings

### 1. Over 450 Essex residents answered the survey.

- This online survey was fielded between October 6-26, 2014.
- It was publicized through Front Porch Forum, Facebook, personal e-mails from EGG committee and their networks, posters, and the *Essex Reporter*. Volunteers also attended Essex Eats Out and provided paper copies.
- 456 people filled out the survey.
- Respondents were self-selected, providing a non-scientific “snapshot” of community.
- Participation was representative across Town and Village (47% and 51%)
- Most respondents were between the ages of 35-64 (over 70 %). There were 48 respondents under age 35 (12%), and 61 over age 65 (15%).
- More women than men filled out survey (59% women, 39 % men).
- 92% identified as white - 4% people of color.
- Most people who filled out the survey had an income between \$50,000 and \$125,000 (56%). 16% had income under \$50,000.
- 6% of survey respondents reported that they had graduated from high school, 34% graduated from college, 41% graduated from graduate school.

### 2. Respondents do participate in our community, and feel local decisions are important.

- A strong majority of respondents are engaged with local issues (not surprising since this was a self-selected group). 89% volunteer, 82% read or watch local news. A majority of people (over 60%) talk local politics and study local issues
  - Respondents said they want to be informed and shape community decisions. They feel a sense of responsibility to the community.
  - Respondents are more likely to participate in informal ways (volunteering, celebrations, community meetings) rather than formal ways (serving on a board, attending town meeting, voting).
  - 99% of respondents feel that local decisions are somewhat or very important.
  - Respondents seem more motivated by their caring about the community (83%) and feeling of responsibility towards the community (68%), than by a desire to restrain spending (22%) or keep tabs on local officials (37%).
  - 40% say there are no barriers to participation (which indicates that 60% perceive some barriers).

**3. Even among this engaged group, many don't attend town meeting or vote in local elections.**

- 48% say they never attend town meeting.
  - People who never go to town meeting cite similar barriers to people who sometimes or always go to town meeting.
  - The majority of people who never go to town meeting do volunteer (70%) but at a lower rate than people who attend town meeting (89%)
- Respondents who never go to town meeting vote **somewhat less** in national elections than those who attend town meeting (85% sometimes or always vs. 96% sometimes or always).
- Respondents who never go to town meeting vote **a lot less** in local elections (57% sometimes or always vote vs. 94% sometimes or always vote).
- Respondents who never go to town meeting feel much less sense of responsibility for community than those who do attend (55% vs. 80%).
- This is especially true for young people (ages 18 - 34). Young people participating in the survey express similar motivations and barriers to participation as all ages, with a few differences:
  - The opportunity to shape the future is a stronger motivator for young people than for all ages (77% vs. 58%).
  - Lack of information and online opportunities is a bigger barrier for young people (info. 54% vs. 32%).
  - Two places where there are big gaps in participation between young people and everyone else is voting and going to town meeting.
    - 28% of young people say they study issues and vote vs. 60% of all respondents.
    - 78% young people never attend town meeting vs. 48% of all respondents.

**4. Respondents identified several barriers to participating.**

*(Respondents could choose as many as applied, so percentages do not add up to 100%)*

- No barriers (40%)
- Lack of information (32%)
- Lack of online opportunities to participate (23%)
- Some people express lack of trust and feeling that participation won't make a difference (11% and 13%)

- Multiple votes and confusion about voting was a barrier for some but not many (10% or under)

**5. Several strong themes emerged, including the desire for more collaboration, transparency and inclusion.**

- Two values stood out well above the others when respondents were asked what local government does well, and where there is most need for improvement:
  - 70% of respondents say “Community minded” is a strong value of local government
  - 46% say “Transparency” is the area most in need of improvement
- When asked in an open-ended question what change people would most like to see, five key ideas show up in the data
  - **A) Interest in merger and/or more collaboration (96 mentions)**
    - merge town and village
    - increase collaboration
    - improve planning processes
  - **B) Desire for more transparency and inclusion (48 mentions)**
    - Communication & Engagement
      - More proactive and innovative ways to share information, including the use of technology and online platforms
      - More opportunities for shared decision-making
      - More opportunities to leverage the skills and expertise of community members
  - **C) More responsive and inclusive leadership (23 mentions)**
    - Concerns that elected, appointed officials and/or staff may have priorities that are not aligned with the community
    - Sense that leaders are not listening or responsive to the diversity of opinions and voices in the community
  - **D) Exploration of new decision making models and voting structures (34 mentions)**
    - suggestions for different models of governance
    - interest in moving voting to Australian ballot along with comments about streamlining voting processes
  - **E) Address tax concerns (24 mentions)**
    - Interest in lowering taxes
    - Streamline and unify town and village as a way to lower taxes

While all of these results are worthy of attention, only the middle three were within EGG's defined scope of work. The November 8th forum provided an opportunity to discuss these key priorities:

- Desire for more transparency, inclusion and responsive leadership
- Interest in new models of decision making & voting structures (i.e. the four approaches to town meeting voting; see Appendix).

## **7. EGG Findings**

The following is a summary of EGG's combined findings from the October Survey and November 8 Forum.

### **1. More Effective Communication is Needed**

Communication is the most prominent strand running through the Essex Governance Group's findings.

When identifying barriers to participation in Essex, survey respondents named "lack of information" most often (32%), and "lack of online opportunities to participate" second most often (23%). Even though 82% of survey respondents said they read or watch local news, many did not feel they were getting the information they wanted in order to participate.

When respondents were asked about how government most needs to improve, "Transparency" was named most often (46%).

At the Nov. 8 EGG Forum, small-table discussions were asked to shed more light on the meaning of "Transparency" in Essex. A number of important themes emerged, as discussed below. The theme of communication re-emerged repeatedly under other topics throughout Forum discussions.

Participants identified several key aspects of communication needs:

#### **A. Explicit Communication**

Participants asked for more accurate, clear, and honest communication. This area was identified separately by all six small groups. Examples included timely and clear explanation on government minutes and agendas so that a person who did not attend the meeting would understand what happened; clearer numbers around total impact of tax bills; and clarity around how citizens can access information.

#### **B. Proactive Communication**

Participants at all six tables used terms like "intentional outreach," "finding ways to connect with citizens," and "being forthright with significant changes in advance." At the end of the Forum, the small groups were asked for their "top ideas," and three fell into this category, asking leaders to *go out to the people* with new, innovative outreach.

#### **C. Online Communication, Open Data**

It is no surprise that Essex, long-time home of IBM, is also home to many tech-savvy citizens with high expectations for online communication. All six tables named this as a priority. Four of the groups' "top ideas" called for a stronger web

presence. Participants indicated interest in all of Essex's data being open to the public, with two "top ideas" naming Burlington's Open Data Initiative as a model. Of the two Forum participants who offered ideas of "what I'd like to do now," one volunteered to host a conversation about how to strengthen Essex's online communications.

#### **D. And Beyond Online**

Participants expressed concern that government reach out in other ways (not all residents use the internet). Strengthening collaboration with the media was mentioned. Some noted that local press coverage needs improvement.

#### **E. Direct Communication with Leaders, Accountability**

Participants value responsiveness: the ability to communicate one-on one with their leaders, and for town officials and staff to provide information directly to citizens. This was named as an advantage of traditional town meeting, the hybrid model, and representative town meeting, and a disadvantage of ballot-box voting. They also called for accountability measures, such as tracking of suggestions and complaints to ensure that communication is honored.

#### **F. Active Listening: Responsive, Respectful, Engaged Communication**

Both leaders and citizens value productive two-way engagement. Participating leaders described the value of "knowing our constituents"; meanwhile, citizens asked for "open-minded listening," and for leaders to be "receptive to ideas and input from community."

## **2. Inclusion is Critical**

The majority of survey respondents (almost 60%) indicated that they felt barriers to participation in local elections and decision making.

As stated above, the most often-cited barriers related to communication. Many survey respondents also cited family or work obligations as limiting their participation. Respondents indicated a mix of other reasons, including not feeling their participation matters, not trusting the system, and confusion about voting.

Those who participated in the Forum expressed strong concerns about the **inclusiveness** of Essex's system. All six tables listed multiple issues regarding inclusion, with a heavy emphasis on the drawbacks of town meeting and the relative merits of Australian ballot voting, including parallel advantages of the hybrid option since it includes Australian ballot. Participants expressed concerns about intimidation at town meeting due to complicated rules/procedures, TV cameras, and loud or impolite people. They cited a variety of advantages offered by Australian ballot including absentee ballot, voting by mail, and 12-hour voting.

Participants voiced worries about **low numbers** in both voter turnout and meeting participation. Some expressed concern that the hybrid method (SB2) would depress town meeting turnout even further.

Participants also called for more **demographic diversity** in participation, including socio-economic, cultural, geographic, and age diversity. Youth was of particular concern. The EGG Survey revealed that young respondents (ages 18-34) were significantly less likely to vote and attend town meeting than older residents. One Forum group's "top idea" was to help youth become more involved, engaged and informed.

### **3. High-Quality, Informed Decision Making is Greatly Valued**

In addition to ensuring that all citizens have the opportunity to participate and vote, Forum participants emphasized that decision-making processes must be of high quality.

The advantages of **deliberative decision making** were raised at all six tables. Traditional town meeting was especially named as offering the opportunity to exchange ideas, hear new opinions, and correct misinformation. However, town meeting was also criticized as potentially causing hasty decision making. Participants expressed some frustration with town meeting management.

Another key element identified at all Forum tables, in keeping with earlier concerns about communication, is the need for **informed and engaged voters** and citizen education. Informed participation was cited as an advantage of town meeting and representative town meeting, while participants bemoaned the lack of participation at informational meetings before Australian ballot voting. They cited the lag-time between discussion and voting as a potential advantage of the hybrid method.

High-quality decision making also means balanced participation, and all tables mentioned uneasiness with the possibility that **special interest groups** could hijack a process.

In another commentary on the importance of methodology, participants saw the choice of decision-making models as a potential element in **building community** (cited as an advantage of town meeting not seen with Australian ballot), or in dividing it (representative town meeting's need for new districts was seen as potentially fractious).

Most tables indicated that a key element of community-minded governance is **balance**: weighing the desires of the few with the needs of the whole, and making decisions based on the greatest long-term good.

Efficiency was also a concern, with most tables naming **costly re-votes** as a downside to Australian ballot.

#### **4. Essex Could Create its Own Model**

A significant number of Forum comments centered on alternative models for democratic engagement.

Of particular interest was the idea of representing citizens at the neighborhood level. Most tables named creating stronger neighborhoods, grassroots efforts or “hyper-local” emphasis as an advantage of the representative town meeting model. Two of the six tables named **Neighborhood Assemblies** such as those used in Burlington as one of their “Top Ideas.”

Most tables suggested **creative improvements** in the existing system. One group wondered whether instead of focusing on dramatic changes in voting, Essex should improve the existing system through technology and other participatory techniques. Another noted that the town selectboard is already making improvements but it will take time to see changes.

Other suggestions included:

- Reducing re-votes (for instance, by having a “no” vote automatically revert to the current budget).
- Improving town meeting participation by changing the time of town meeting, issuing specific invitations, and otherwise reducing barriers.
- One “Top Idea” was using technology (e.g. Skype) to allow remote meeting attendance/participation.
- Providing a way for voters to give specific feedback to leaders after ballot-box voting. One group’s “Top Idea” was to allow citizens to give budget feedback by incorporating a survey into the ballot.

All six tables named two-way communication between municipal leaders/staff and residents as an important **alternative to formal hearings/meetings**. “Build bridges, not walls” was one comment; another was “lots of avenues for two-way communication in a user-friendly form.” Several groups called for more topical community forums such as those hosted by Heart and Soul. (In Forum evaluations, when asked “How helpful would it be to have more of these kinds of community conversations in Essex?” 81% of respondents said that it would be “helpful” or “extremely helpful.”)

**Non-formal participation** is an important element not only of community, but what local government means to citizens. When asked “how do you participate in our community,” survey respondents were more likely to participate in informal ways (volunteering, celebrations) than in formal ways (e.g. serving on boards).

However, when Forum participants were asked “What does government being community minded mean to you?” almost all groups named support of non-formal activities such as grassroots organizations, block parties, Farmer’s Market, and concerts. For many citizens, the border between informal “community” and formal “government” is fuzzy; these comments indicate that each side of the line can benefit from the energy of the other.

Four comments wondered whether Essex should consider a **city form of government**, with one group naming neighborhood assemblies reporting to a Mayor as a “top idea.”

## **5. Residents Value the Power and Immediacy of Direct Democracy**

All six tables named **citizens’ direct democratic power** as an advantage of traditional town meeting, such as the ability to amend. “Direct democracy: we are the legislators” was a repeated sentiment, and the lack of amendment power was cited as a downside of Australian ballot. “Adding a layer” between voters and their decision making was seen as a negative element of representative town meeting, with a fear of centralizing power to an elite few. Several named Vermont’s long local tradition as a positive element of town meeting. At the same time, some complained that citizen power is actually *not strong enough* at town meeting; it’s “hard to make real changes,” and “amendment power is limited.”

Most tables appreciated the **immediacy** of town meeting. “The work is done when the meeting is done” was a common sentiment. In contrast, the hybrid model creates a two-step process, and with Australian ballot, “a no-vote means a revote.”

## **6. Same Day Voting, and a Call for Simplicity**

In a typical spring in order to participate in every local vote, Town resident need to vote three different times, and Village residents, five times. Survey results indicated that while it wasn’t the top concern, the complexities of voting were a barrier to participation. At the Forum, four tables offered comments indicating their interest in **same-day voting**. Two groups named same-day voting as one of their “Top Ideas.”

Simplicity and clarity was a common thread in other areas, seen especially as an advantage of ballot-box voting. One group’s “Top Idea” was “Simplify: Governance, communication, education (of municipal issues, budgets).”

All six tables expressed some trepidation about the **implementation** of one or more of the new decision-making models discussed. The hybrid (SB2) model raised the most apprehension about implementation, with representative town meeting a

close second. Clearly, any changes should be made with caution, and with confusion and upheaval kept to a minimum.

## **8. EGG Recommendations**

The Essex Governance Group recommends the following actions. They are intended as a “package.” In particular in the case of the first three recommendations, the success of each will be enhanced by the others. For those recommendations that cannot be acted on immediately, EGG recommends that Essex leaders commit to a timeline to move forward.

- A. Launch Proactive Communication Program**
- B. Empower Neighborhoods**
- C. Switch to Enhanced Town Meeting/Australian Ballot Hybrid**
- D. Institute Same-Day Voting**

### **A. Launch Proactive Communication Program**

*Essex residents value their government’s “community minded” nature, and have expressed a strong desire for more two-way communication with leaders and staff. Ideally proactive communication does not need to add to the overall workload of officials and staff, but instead can enable leaders to succeed at existing tasks more effectively with the understanding and active support of the public.*

#### **Action steps:**

##### **1. Public Engagement Protocol**

Create, adopt and implement an Essex Public Engagement Protocol for use by all departments (see sample protocol from Portland, Oregon in Appendix). The protocol allows staff and community members to implement appropriate public engagement for each municipal project.

##### **2. Training**

Train current municipal leaders and staff in best public engagement practices, to ensure that proactive citizen participation is a meaningful part of everyone’s job.

##### **3. Hiring and Performance Expectations**

Incorporate public engagement skills and expectations into all municipal job descriptions, hiring expectations, and performance reviews.

##### **4. Website**

Revamp websites and link Town/Village online presence, based on citizen and staff input

##### **5. Informal Meetings**

Convene quarterly, informal get-togethers for residents to meet with elected municipal officials and staff. Bring the meetings to places where people may already be gathered (e.g. a bar, a school play, a community event).

## **B. Empower Neighborhoods**

*While Essex residents want to improve inclusivity, many also value face-to-face, deliberative decision making and direct democracy. The immediacy of local decision making is inspiring to youth, and local issues like parks interest young families. Devolving power on specific planning and budgeting decisions to the neighborhood level would build on Essex's "small town feel" and community engagement while bringing in new participation. (Burlington's Neighborhood Planning Assemblies may be a useful model.)*

### **Action step:**

#### **1. Create Neighborhood Assemblies**

Create Neighborhood Assemblies to make recommendations on neighborhood and municipal issues (such as planning, development, lighting and safety). The Assemblies would serve as official advisors to the municipality (in alignment with the recommended public engagement protocol—see recommendation A-1 above). Invite leaders to attend Neighborhood Assemblies.

## **C. Switch to Enhanced Town Meeting/Australian Ballot Hybrid**

*After considering a variety of options for deliberating and voting on budgets, EGG recommends changes that incorporate participants' strong interest in inclusivity while building on Essex's robust community-mindedness. The proposed hybrid model is purposefully paired with a powerfully enhanced town meeting, with the goal of protecting it from the reduced participation often experienced in New Hampshire's larger hybrid (SB2) towns. A minimum attendance requirement ensures that amendments can not be made by a tiny minority. Changes (especially to the charter) should be carefully coordinated to create the least confusion for Essex citizens.*

### **Action steps:**

#### **1. Upgrade the current Town Meeting to an "Essex Democracy Day"**

Essex Democracy Day would have the elements of the current Town Meeting, but with improved participation options (e.g. could include remote town meeting participation), and also could include a congress of Neighborhood Assemblies, a facilitated community forum on a key issue, and a dinner and celebration.

#### **2. Amendment Requirement**

If attendance at Town Meeting is high enough (equal to or greater than the median town meeting attendance during the past 10 years from 2005 through 2014), citizens attending that Town Meeting will continue to have the power to amend the budget. This meeting determines the final budget number to be sent to the voters of Essex for approval by Australian ballot. (Note: if attendance is below this percentage, then that particular year's Town Meeting would be informational only, with no power to amend.)

### **3. Amended budget voted on by Australian ballot**

Final budget is sent to voters of Essex for approval by Australian ballot vote, to be held 45 days after Town Meeting.

### **4. Survey included with ballot**

A survey should be included with the ballot, to allow residents the opportunity to offer comment.

### **5. Town meeting date**

Change the date of town meeting so it doesn't happen right after school break.

## **D. Institute Same-Day Voting**

*In a typical spring in order to participate in every vote on local issues, Town residents must vote three different times, and Village residents five times. Complexities of local voting were named as a barrier to participation. Forum participants also expressed concern that each individual vote does not convey the overall impact of their property tax.*

*Because Essex's voting involves five separate municipal units and separate municipal clerks, this change must be made with careful, coordinated planning. It will increase work for local clerks' office, and so will require additional staffing to ensure that they can maintain their traditionally high standards and low incidence of voter problems.*

### ***Action step:***

#### **1. Create a staged plan to combine voting dates and Town/Village Meeting dates.**

Over a specified time, institute same-day voting with all budgets voted on the same day. (This is not a proposal for a single ballot; voters would receive multiple ballots.) This process would also include combining Town and Village Meeting dates.

## **9. Conclusion**

The Essex Governance Group respectfully offers EGG's Findings and Recommendations to the Essex Selectboard and the Essex community as a whole. We hope the community's voice is heard through the Findings, and that the EGG Recommendations will serve as a useful guide for action.

Essex leaders are in a position to strengthen the civic life of the community, and hundreds of residents have expressed their interest and support for improvements. The time is right. The Essex residents who contributed to EGG's work stand ready to help.

## **10. Appendices**

**Appendix A:** Portland, Oregon Participation protocol

**Appendix B:** Survey results, coded (link)

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1bMuzDpTcC-3ntXqXuAYbU6AxiGv2c8DNuNRSjuJfPOg/edit?usp=sharing>

**Appendix C:** Forum agenda and "Four Approaches"

**Appendix D:** Forum small-table results, coded

**Appendix E:** List of EGG Participants, Facilitator/Author Bios