

Thoughtful Growth in Action Final Report

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On behalf of the Thoughtful Growth in Action Project

www.essexgia.com



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Overview

Thoughtful Growth in Action (TGIA) has focused on exploring new approaches to planning governance structures in the Town of Essex and the Village of Essex Junction. The project stemmed from the belief, highlighted by the Heart & Soul of Essex project, that the community wants a shared vision that honors and builds on the unique characteristics of the Village and the Town outside the Village. Moving towards a shared vision, however, may be complicated by the current planning structure of two Planning Commissions and two Zoning Boards.

The project had three primary goals:

- To create a shared understanding about how planning works today;
- To engage in a conversation about how changes in planning governance could lead to more thoughtful growth in the Town and Village; and
- To explore possible paths to improve the current planning governance structure in Essex moving forward.

This report presents a summary of TGIA's process, findings and recommendations.

SCENARIO PLANNING

TGIA used a method called Scenario Planning to present and evaluate different governance options. The benefit of this approach is that it provides a concrete framework for participants to think about trade-offs between choices. It also encourages people to articulate what they like or do not like about options, which often leads to the development of a better "preferred alternative" that may have characteristics of different options presented.

Project Process

TGIA used a mix of research and community participation to develop a set of findings and recommendations. Over 300 Essex residents participated in the project through one of the following activities:



Community Workshops: TGIA held two community workshops to solicit input from the broader community. The first workshop focused on gathering participants' hopes and concerns about planning in Essex. The second workshop solicited input from participants on their reactions to the project's findings and recommendations.



Community Survey: TGIA conducted an online survey from September to October in order to complement the first Community Workshop and provide an additional input mechanism for early input into the process.



Working Group Sessions: Twenty-four Essex residents and key stakeholders participated in four intensive sessions in order to explore planning governance issues and develop a set of recommendations.



Targeted Outreach: TGIA used a project website and newsletter as well as a variety of other communication channels to share information about project progress. It also reached out to those most familiar with planning and development review to get their input.



Issues Based Research: TGIA used a variety of ways to gather information on key governance issues from other communities, regional entities and state resources.

Small group discussion at Community Workshop #2



Key Findings

TGIA developed a set of findings related to long range planning, development review, board development, staffing, resources and community participation in planning. Top findings include:

There is a desire for greater collaboration across the Town and Village. While ad hoc collaboration around planning already occurs across the Town and Village, there was a clear interest in more collaboration.

The differences between the Town and Village matter but so does the relationship between the two. Many workshop and survey respondents spoke to ways in which the town and village were different yet also complementary.

The current governance structure is not broken but there is potential for improvement. While both Planning Commissions spend a significant portion of their time on long range planning, there was an expressed desire to dedicate more time to more proactive planning in addition to the state required updates to the municipal plans. There is also the potential to even out board work load and match up volunteers' skills better if board responsibilities were more distinct. However, it would be paramount to ensure the connection between long range plan and practical application of bylaws and development review.

Early on in the process some raised the question of whether the current structure made for an inefficient process (i.e. potential for applications to have to go to two different boards). Although there

is not as much of an efficiency problem as some people thought may be the case at the project's beginning, the perception of the process's simplicity could be improved.

There is room to improve community participation efforts. Many of the comments TGIA received about development review had to do with community members own experiences with a particular application review process. These comments often related to the feeling of a lack of transparency or a feeling of not being heard. It is likely that some of these experiences related to a mismatch between residents' expectations about how much influence they could have in the process and what is possible for boards to consider.

While structural changes will address some of the findings above, many of them will be better addressed through non-structural recommendations that could be adopted under any governance board structure.

Recommendations

TGIA developed a set of four recommendations for the Town of Essex Selectboard and Village of Essex Junction Trustees to consider:

RECOMMENDATION #1: MOVE TO CREATE A JOINT PLANNING COMMISSION AND TWO SEPARATE DEVELOPMENT REVIEW BOARDS.

This recommendation would create a formal Joint Planning Commission as enabled under State Statute (VSA Title 24, Chapter 117, Subchapter 2). Planning Commissioners would be appointed

by the Selectboard, as required by State Statute, with the possibility of establishing a formal process by which Trustees could nominate members and /or make recommendations. It would create two separate Development Review Boards that would be appointed by their respective legislative bodies. Also, over time, Essex would move towards the adoption of a single Municipal Plan. There would be two sets of bylaws that would be adopted by their respective legislative bodies (i.e. Selectboard or Trustees).

RECOMMENDATION #2: USE A PHASED APPROACH TO STRUCTURAL CHANGES.

The transition to a different governance structure will require a thoughtful and deliberate approach. As appropriate, changes should be phased in order to evaluate whether they are producing a more effective planning governance structure.

RECOMMENDATION #3: EMPOWER BOARDS TO ESTABLISH A TIMEFRAME AND WORK WITH STAFF TO MAKE A PLAN FOR TRANSITION.

The Town Selectboard and Village Trustees are ultimately responsible for making decisions about what changes will occur. TGIA encourages both bodies to coordinate with their respective Planning Commissions, Zoning Boards of Adjustment and Community Development staffs to ensure any transition occurs smoothly. In addition, the broader community should be kept informed about transition plans and provided with opportunities to provide input when appropriate.

RECOMMENDATION #4: CONTINUE TO EXPLORE AND IMPLEMENT WAYS TO IMPROVE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN PLANNING.

There are several areas where improvements are possible including:

- **Communications 2.0:** Refine messaging and communication channels to better communicate planning issues.
- **Participation 2.0:** Improve current methods of participation and develop new ways for people to participate in planning.
- **Open Access:** Provide easier access to town related data such as developing a permit tracking system.
- **Human Resources:** Consider ways to support staff and volunteers in their efforts to encourage public participation.

This Report

This report is the result of a participatory process that aimed to study and recommend possible changes to planning governance. The Town Selectboard and Village Trustees will determine what changes, if any, are made. The purpose of this report is to document how and why TGIA developed its specific recommendations to aid in the municipal decision-making process.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Thoughtful Growth in Action (TGIA) has focused on exploring new approaches to planning governance structure in the Town of Essex and the Village of Essex Junction. The project stemmed from the belief, highlighted by the Heart & Soul of Essex project, that the community wants a shared vision that honors and builds on the unique characteristics of the Village and the Town outside the Village. Moving towards a shared vision, however, may be complicated by the current planning structure of two Planning Commissions and two Zoning Boards.

The support for TGIA also comes from the interest of the Town of Essex Selectboard and the Village of Essex Junction Trustees in consolidating municipal services when it makes sense to do so. While the project was born out of this interest there was no directive to look at only consolidated options. TGIA explored a variety of choices for planning governance, which will be described in more detail later in this report.

Goals

The project had three primary goals:

- To create a shared understanding about how planning works today;
- To engage in a conversation about how changes in planning governance could lead to more thoughtful growth in the Town and Village; and
- To explore possible paths to improve the current planning governance structure in Essex moving forward.

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What is Planning Governance?

TGIA developed the following definition of planning governance. The project was largely focused on governance structures, primarily the Planning Commissions and Zoning Boards of Adjustment.

The values, rules, structures and people that guide what our community is and what it will become.

VALUES		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H&S • "Urban" • "Rural" 	
RULES		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies • Regulations 	
STRUCTURES		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selectboard & Trustees • Planning Commissions • Zoning Boards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other Municipal Boards • Municipal Departments
PEOPLE		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residents • Business owners • Land owners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developers • Municipal staff

PROJECT PROCESS

TGIA used a balance of issue-based research and community input to develop its findings and recommendations. This approach enables Essex to learn from the experiences of other communities and develop governance options that are feasible within the specific context of the community.

Community Participation

Over 300 Essex residents participated in TGIA over the course of five months (see Project Timeline on next page). They were engaged in the project through a variety of activities; brief descriptions of those activities are included below. Full summaries of input from all activities can be found in this report's companion Appendix or online in the project's library: <http://www.essextgia.com/library.html> (online library will be available through May 10, 2016).

Small group discussions at Community Workshop #1



COMMUNITY WORKSHOP #1

The first Community Workshop focused on gathering participants' hopes and concerns about planning in Essex. Discussion focused on issues including but not limited to leadership and staff resources, economic development, open space, historic preservation, housing, transportation, walkability, aesthetics and community engagement.

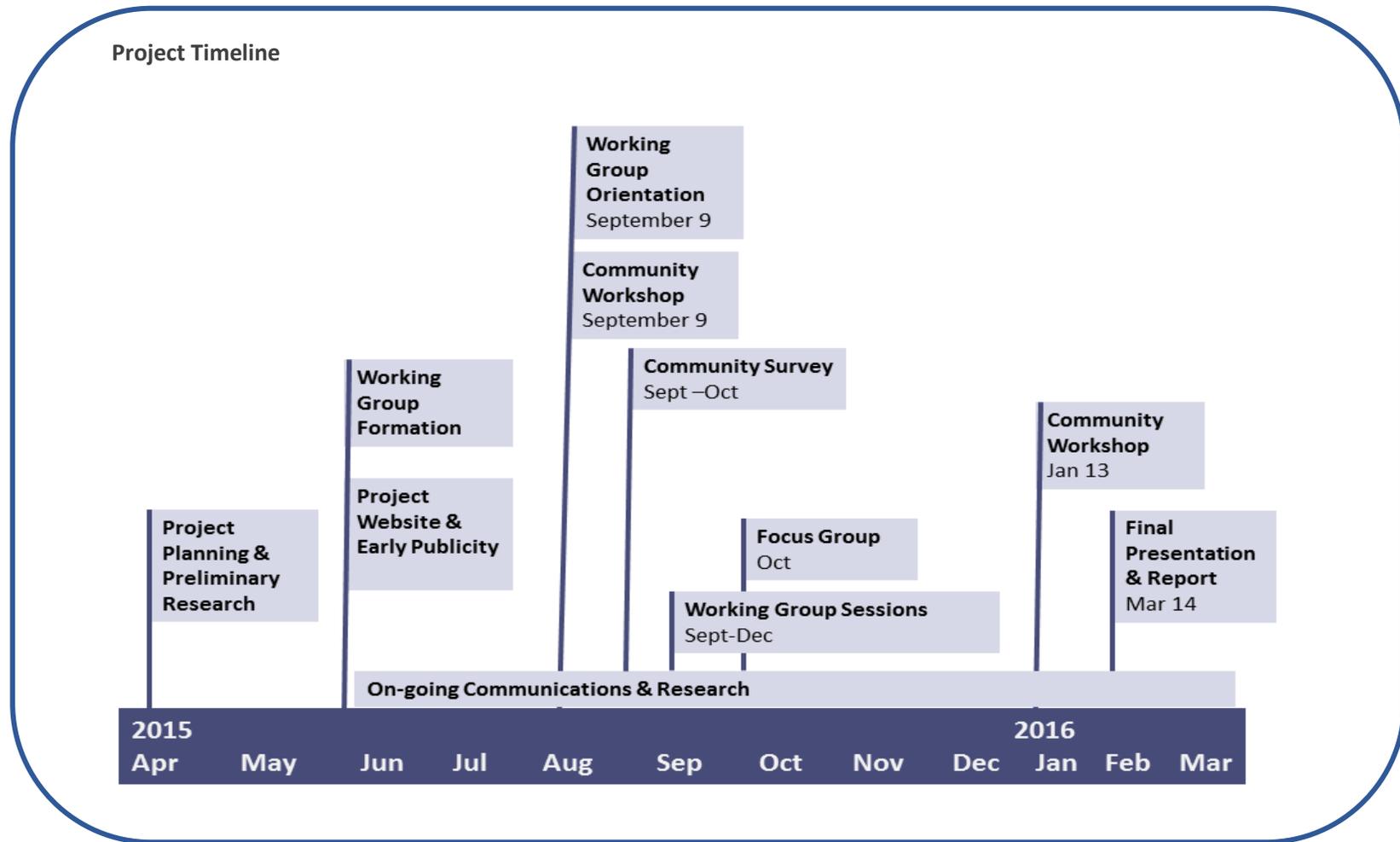
COMMUNITY SURVEY

The Community Survey used the input from the Community Workshop to frame questions related to the similarities and differences between the Village and the Town outside the Village as well as gather information on people's perspectives and experiences with planning in the community.

In terms of understanding how planning works in Essex, over half the participants indicated "don't know" for most of the questions related to governance. In the survey comments, many respondents shared their dissatisfaction with recent projects in some way (e.g. process around the decisions, aesthetics of the projects, potential municipal costs, perception that Essex is a "developer's town").

In terms of similarities and differences between the parts of town, just about half of respondents believe there is a desire for a shared vision and/or that there is a synergistic relationship between the two parts of the community (vs. 30% who do not). Almost 80% of respondents agree that greater collaboration between the two parts of Essex would lead to more thoughtful growth.

However, there was more of a split on whether planning priorities are the same. On the specific issues of economic development and open space, the majority of respondents felt these opportunities look different between the two parts of the community. On other issues including housing and transportation, responses were more evenly divided between respondents thinking there are similar opportunities and those who think they are different.



WORKING GROUP SESSIONS

The TGIA Working Group was charged with exploring governance issues in depth and coming up with recommendations for the Selectboard and Trustees. This 24-member body was intended to represent the diversity of experiences and perspectives in the community. It included a mix of men and women, residents from all parts of Essex, people with a variety of professions and experience with planning. Intentionally, it included members from the two Community Development staffs, both Planning Commissions, both Zoning Boards of Adjustment, the Town Selectboard, the Village Trustees, local developers, and many residents who do not have a formal role in planning in Essex. The Working Group process included:

Onboarding Interviews: After the Working Group was appointed, the consultants interviewed members to get their initial take on core issues related to the project. These findings were presented in a summary report and helped shape the project approach.

Orientation: TGIA hosted an orientation for Working Group members so that they could meet each other and ask questions about the project. The orientation also served as training for members so they could help facilitate small group discussions at community workshops.

Session #1: This session focused on developing agreements for how the group would work together, reviewing project goals and core questions, and developing a set of principles to help guide the development and evaluation of different governance options.

Session #2: This session aimed to develop a shared understanding of how planning works in Essex today, to explore different structural options for long range planning and land development review, to confirm a set of principles to help guide the development and evaluation of different planning governance options, and to take an initial temperature read on where members are with different structural options.

Session #3: This session focused on reviewing and discussing planning governance scenarios and presenting key public engagement challenges based on research to date.

Session #4: This session reviewed and discussed refined planning governance scenarios, reached agreement on a preferred governance alternative, and assessed different ideas to address key engagement challenges based on research to date.

In addition to these activities, TGIA used inter-session surveys to gather additional input from the group. Working Group members were highly committed and engaged in the project with 20 or more members at every session (minimum of an 83% participation rate).

Working Group session



TARGETED STAKEHOLDER ACTIVITIES

TGIA also conducted activities aimed at soliciting input from two key groups:

Planning Focus Group: This session raised a series of questions about the current governance structure as well as different options with members of the Planning Commissions, Zoning Boards of Adjustment and Community Development staffs. The Focus Group provided insights into how the boards spend their time now, the potential for more collaborative planning, and considerations for changes to board structures.

Developer Inquiries: Community development staff distributed an email inquiry to several members from the development community to get their take on questions related to planning and development review in Essex. Most respondents cited no major issues with current review processes but generally liked the idea of creating efficiencies where possible. Many noted that the approach/agendas of the actual board members has more weight in the issue of review than the board structure.

COMMUNITY WORKSHOP #2

The second Community Workshop focused on sharing project findings and recommendations with participants and getting their reactions to the information. TGIA asked the following:

- What about the findings and recommendations resonated with you?
- What about the findings and recommendations concerned you?
- Was there anything missing from your perspective?

More detailed responses to this information are included on page 34 of this report in the context of the TGIA findings and recommendations.

TGIA by the numbers


300
Total
Participants


24
Working
Group
Members


640
Website
Unique
Visitors


20
Other
Towns
Researched


\$13,450
Value of Time
Contributed by
WG Members


90
Newsletter
Subscribers

Issues-based Research

TGIA used a variety of ways to gather information on issues related to planning governance:

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

Prior to the public engagement work, the consultant reviewed pertinent municipal, regional and state resources related to changes in planning governance. Also, she conducted six interviews with individuals who could offer insights into the unique Essex situation, provide experiences from other communities with different planning structures, or offer a regional/state perspective.

Preliminary research provided insight into key issues related to planning governance including Essex's past inquiries into this topic, informed the type of information that would be included in governance scenarios, and provided support to the case for recruiting a diversity of participants for the Working Group.

ISSUE INQUIRIES

Throughout the project the consultant worked with Community Development staff to make inquiries to Vermont planners through the Vermont Planners Association Listerv. These inquiries were based on questions that came up in the research or issues raised as part of the community engagement sessions. Inquiries specific to the statutory issues of governance were also made to the Vermont League of Cities and Towns as well as the attorneys for the Town of Essex and Village of Essex Junction.

These inquiries allowed TGIA to vet different ideas and issues with a broader network of individuals with experience in planning governance in Vermont, which provided additional context and considerations on which to draw when developing recommendations.

TOWN RESEARCH

The consultant conducted additional research and spoke with municipal staff from nine communities in Vermont that have gone through governance changes, lessons of which could have application in Essex. Those municipalities included: Enosburg Falls, Hyde Park, Johnson, Mad River Valley Planning District, Morristown, South Burlington, Rockingham, Waterbury, and Woodstock. As with the Issue Inquiries, this work was done in response to questions that came up during the project.

This research enabled TGIA to share several specific examples of how other communities have dealt with the kinds of issues that Essex would face in a governance transition.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Based on the community input from the first Workshop and Survey, as well as Working Group discussion, five guiding principles were developed to help define what kind of planning Essex wants to see moving forward. This information guided the Working Group's deliberations and can be used to inform future discussions and decisions.

The principles are:



Principle #1: Encourage long range planning that...

- Is guided by an understanding of the shared interests and interrelationship between the Town outside the Village and the Town inside the Village;
- Supports priorities that reflect the unique characteristics of both; and
- Receives on-going, focused attention by the Planning Commission(s).



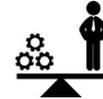
Principle #2: Support a development review process that...

- Enables a consistent, transparent and efficient application review process;
- Balance rights of property owners and members of the community; and
- Reflects the vision and goals of Municipal Plan(s).



Principle #3: Develop boards and staff that...

- Uphold the vision and goals of the Municipal Plan(s);
- Can maximize the use of their knowledge, skills and interests; and
- Communicate consistently and effectively among each other.



Principle #4: Resource a planning governance structure that...

- Maintains or lowers the cost to the taxpayer,
- Ensures a high quality of service; and
- Supports manageable workloads for boards and staff.



Principle #5: Encourage community participation that...

- Fosters a greater understanding of how planning works;
- Uses effective and intentional engagement opportunities; and
- Uses a varied range of communication channels.

PROJECT FINDINGS

The information gathered across community participation and research activities informed a set of key findings that highlight challenges and opportunities facing planning in Essex today. The findings are organized by the guiding principles.



LONG RANGE PLANNING

Town/Village Differences: There are differences between the character and approach to growth and conservation in the Town outside the Village and the Town inside the Village. For instance, while economic development and open space protection are important to both parts of the community, the shape of those opportunities looks different in the Village and in the Town outside the Village.

Consequently, there is a concern for some participants that a consolidated planning framework may lose sight of distinct issues and priorities of each part of Essex – or worse, have the agenda for one part of the community supersede the other. On the flip side, others feel there is the potential to recognize, build on and better balance these differences if planning were to be more consolidated because the overall plan for the community could be strengthened by looking across Essex as a whole.

For instance, conversations about where growth should be concentrated could consider the whole of Essex as opposed to considering places like Five Corners and the Town Center in isolation.

Collaboration: A number of project participants expressed a desire for greater collaboration across the two parts of town. While there are examples of coordinated planning these are generally ad hoc. There is potential for a more formalized structure to support greater collaboration.

Long Range Planning: There is a perceived need on the part of the community and a desire on the part of the boards to focus more on long range planning. Currently, while both Planning Commissions do long range planning it comes primarily in the form of plan updates required by Statute. At the Planning Focus Group, members from both Commissions expressed interest in doing more proactive and “visionary” planning.

In addition, long range planning has to take a back seat to development review requirements of the Planning Commissions (i.e. if there is a large number of applications to be reviewed then long term planning must be postponed). While the application work load is typically manageable there are crunch times or unique cases like Saxon Hill that take up a disproportionate amount of time on the part of Planning Commissioners and staff.

In the Town outside the Village, staff works to ensure focus on long range planning by dedicating every other Planning Commission meeting to long range planning projects. The Village has also spent significant time on long range planning through the Village Plan update and the Village Trustees have initiated special projects like Design Five Corners.

Long range planning could benefit from greater attention from the Planning Commissions but it could also be improved through other mechanisms as well, such as greater resources for more in-depth and participatory planning projects, and more opportunities from cross-community dialogue about shared issues.



DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

Resident Experience: Numerous participants spoke to dissatisfaction with the development review process particularly about the level of influence (or lack thereof) residents have in the review of specific applications and the outcomes of those application reviews. While there may be validity to that criticism a broader issue appears to be that many residents do not understand how or when they can have the most influence in planning.

Often, residents’ planning experiences are limited to speaking at a hearing for a particular project. These hearings are one of the last steps in a longer process that moves from municipal plan development to bylaw development to the specifics of development

review. Residents are often entering the process when legally their opinion cannot influence a decision in significant ways.

Review Efficiency: There is a perception that development review would be more efficient if applications went to only one board as opposed to potentially two. Currently, only a handful of applications go to the Zoning Boards in any given year and even fewer are heard by both boards. While moving to a one-stop process (i.e. adopting a Development Review Board model) would improve the perception of the process and simplify it for some applications, it is likely that enabling more administrative review of

Development Review Analysis

2014 development application data for the Town and Village suggest that very few applications are required to go before both the Planning Commission and Zoning Board in either part of the community. Community development staff noted that this one-year snapshot is consistent with past years of applications as well.

Applications in the Town	Applications in the Village
30	7
Number heard by Planning Commission	Number heard by Planning Commission
25	5
Number heard by Zoning Board	Number heard by Zoning Board
6	2
Number heard by both boards	Number heard by both boards
1	0

applications or simplifying the subdivision bylaws would do more to streamline review. In the future, it may make sense to consider simplifying bylaws around development review to streamline process while maintaining high review standards.

Review Complexity: Larger projects are getting more complex which require staff to work more with applicants to prepare applications for a board hearing. This complexity increases staff work load and can leave citizens with the sense that decisions have been made without public input.

Balancing Interests: There is a need to balance the desire of land owners or applicants for clarity around rules and process with the interests of other residents to ensure a development does not have a negative impact on the community or a neighborhood. It has been raised that the specifics of a development application review (e.g. in the nuance of the decision and requirements as opposed to outright acceptance or denial) may have more to do with the personalities and skills of particular board members as opposed to the bylaws or guiding municipal plans.

Plan Connectivity: The current system enables the Planning Commission to understand the realities of development review when updating the municipal plans or bylaws and for it to consider the intent behind those guiding documents when reviewing applications. There is a concern that shifting review powers to one board (like a Development Review Board) would create disconnect between long range planning and development review.



BOARDS AND STAFF

Staff Communications: Community development staff communicate well across the Town and Village albeit mostly informally. They plan together as part of the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission and have the opportunity to review each other's plans as part of that agency's municipal plan review process.

Board Communication: There is not regular communication between the Planning Commission and Zoning Board in either part of Essex nor is there regular board communication across the two parts of the community.

Board Roles: Zoning Board members meet only a few times a year whereas Planning Commissioners often meet twice monthly, which illustrates the greater work load of the Planning Commissions. It is possible for the Zoning Board to take on more responsibilities, or for a move to a Development Review Board, but these changes could make the Planning Commission appear less relevant to municipal decision making because they would not have a direct say over specific development applications.

Skills and Interests: There is the potential to better use the skills and interests of volunteer board members if long range planning and development review are separated. Anecdotally, some towns that have moved to a Planning Commission/Development Review

Board model have had an easier time filling board seats with this separation of tasks. However, if the Planning Commission becomes complacent in their long range planning efforts, it may become more difficult to fill those seats.



RESOURCES

Staffing: Most input received indicated satisfaction with the current level of service although many noted that staff seems at capacity. This appears to be the case particularly in the Village where there are 1.8 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) positions dedicated to community development (compared to 4.1 FTEs in the Town). Some of the challenge for staff relates to the number of night meetings associated with supporting all the municipal boards. It could be helpful to consider ways to better coordinate night meetings so that staff workloads overall are more manageable (which would benefit volunteer board members as well).

Resource Allocation: While there is a desire to keep costs manageable there is also a desire to ensure that planning functions well and that Essex can allocate resources effectively to support planning priorities. Currently, about \$680,000 is allocated to the Community Development departments collectively. The majority of that money goes towards staff salaries and benefits. There is not much in the FY 2016 budgets to support additional planning initiatives (e.g. taking on specific long range planning projects).

Outside Funding: Both Community Development departments bring in outside funding. As long as the Town of Essex and the Village of Essex Junction remain separate municipalities, both remain eligible for key funding sources like regional transportation funds or statewide planning grants.



COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Community Understanding: While project participants expressed concern with the development review process, even more noted a lack of understanding for how planning works in Essex. There is a need to develop resources so that residents can better understand planning and development review. Also, there is the potential to develop different methods and tools to use in planning or development review meetings to help participants understand the process and their role in it regardless of whether they have studied up beforehand.



Communications: While Essex goes above and beyond statutory requirements regarding public notice for planning activities there are still criticisms that more could be done or that the messaging around planning issues could be more effective. There are specific challenges that municipal staff will need to overcome to use existing channels better or to using new channels (e.g. current limits on monthly posts to Front Porch Forum or costs of advertising in local papers or using new digital platforms). Better communication will need a coordinated and focused effort.

Participation Opportunities: Top barriers to participation relate to how busy people are today and their desire for alternative ways to participate (i.e. beyond the typical evening meeting). There is a desire for more online options to participate as well as more “hyper local” opportunities, which activates smaller online networks or more neighborhood based structures. There are examples of Essex using different participatory methods such as the Heart & Soul Neighborhood Conversations, where trained volunteers facilitated a series of discussions of groups organized around specific geographies or affinity groups.

As with communications, additional engagement will require resources in the form of staff time, volunteer effort or outside expertise. While some may jump to the conclusion that Essex could just do what it’s currently doing differently it’s not quite that easy; many of the meeting structures in place today are required by law. While there is potential to modify current structures it may be necessary to adopt new approaches to engagement that complement existing structures.

Top Barriers to Planning Participation

TGIA’s Community Survey asked respondents to indicate what limits their participation in planning. Top responses (those receiving 35% or more responses) include:

- 45%** - Lack of online options
- 41%** - Time required to participate
- 37%** - Timing of most planning activities
- 37%** - I do not believe my input will matter

Civic Culture: Some residents expressed distrust of planning and/or a sense that their voices don’t matter. Some of this perception will likely improve as a result of efforts to improve planning education, communications, and engagement opportunities. However, changing civic culture is a long process. Improving community engagement requires sustained commitment; it may take years of effort to create a healthy culture of civic engagement (and unfortunately only one bad experience to set that progress back). The more done to build a sustainable infrastructure to support public participation the better.

Findings in Sum

Looking across these findings a set of high level observations comes through:

There is a desire for greater collaboration across the Town and Village. While ad hoc collaboration around planning already occurs across the Town and Village, there was a clear interest in more collaboration.

The differences between the Town and Village matter but so does the relationship between the two. Many workshop and survey respondents spoke to ways in which the town and village were different yet complementary.

The current governance structure is not broken but there is potential for improvement. While both Planning Commissions spend a significant portion of their time on long range planning, there was an expressed desire to dedicate more time to more proactive planning in addition to the state required updates to the municipal plans. There is also the potential to even out board work load and match up volunteers' skills better if board responsibilities were more distinct. However, it would be paramount to ensure the connection between long range plan and practical application of bylaws and development review.

Early in the TGIA process some asked if the current structure made for an inefficient process (i.e. potential for applications to have to go to two different boards). Although there is not much of an efficiency problem as some people thought may be the case at the

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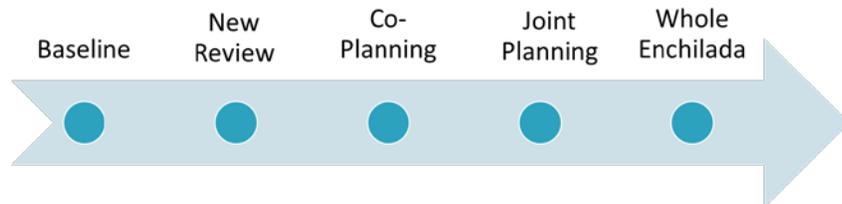
GOVERNANCE SCENARIOS

In order to understand the rationale for TGIA’s recommendations, this section explains the five scenarios presented to the Working Group along with the Group’s assessment of the pros and cons of each one (developed in Working Group Session #3). Please note that these scenarios relate to the structural recommendations in the next section as opposed to the non-structural ones made related to community participation.

Change Continuum

In its third session, the Working Group explored five scenarios that incorporated different structural options that seemed most feasible given input to date.

The five scenarios fell along a change continuum. The Baseline represented no structural changes from what we have today, whereas the Whole Enchilada on the opposite end represented a full consolidation of planning related boards.



SCENARIO #1: BASELINE: This scenario is the same as the structure that is in place today. There are a variety of non-structural options that could shift how planning happens even if the current structures remain.

Working Group Comments:

Pros

- Requires no changes
- Works pretty well
- Easy to sell to the public and educate them about
- “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”
- Planning group connected to everyday decisions
- Currently receive few criticisms from development community
- Non-structural solutions could help solve current criticisms, eg: transparency
- No staffing changes
- Developers having to go to two boards adds a good level of scrutiny

Cons

- Village board members must be from the Village while Town members can be from the Village or Town outside the Village
- Some criticisms – lack of transparency
- Uneven work loads
- Limited opportunities to plan jointly, including big picture visioning, joint execution of big ideas, like: trees, bike paths, and planning related to one jurisdiction
- Twice as many seats on all boards
- Lack of collaboration between Village and Town outside the Village
- Hard to explain to the public
- Duplicative process for developers



SCENARIO #2: NEW REVIEW: This scenario maintains separate Planning Commissions but eliminates the Zoning Boards of Adjustment replacing them with Development Review Boards. All the development review functions of the current Planning Commissions would shift to the Development Review Boards. The Town and Village attorneys have advised that Municipal Charter changes would likely be necessary to create Development Review Boards.

EXAMPLE

Hyde Park had a Joint Planning Commission and single Development Review Board from 2005 through 2015. In 2012, it adopted a unified Town/Village Plan and was in the process of unifying its bylaws when earlier this year the Village Trustees decided to split from the joint planning structure without prior discussion with the Town Selectboard or Joint Planning Commission in order "To implement our vision for Village growth..." The Village established a separate Planning Commission consisting of the 5 elected Trustees and a Development Review Board consisting of 2 elected Trustees and 3 appointed residents. The primary reason for the move was the desire to ensure that the new-Form Based Code would be strictly enforced.

Working Group Comments:

Pros

- More equitable distribution of work load
- More time for long-range planning by planning commissions
- Change offers opportunity for increased public awareness
- Opportunity to layer design review with DRB
- Trend in communities around VT
- Might attract new interest for board members
- Fewer planning board meetings
- A simple change – easy to communicate
- Less potential for staff chaos
- Fewer staff reports

Cons

- Doesn't go far enough
- More work for DRB, than current ZBA
- Difficulties with transitions for current members
- Doesn't enhance collaboration between Village and Town outside the Village
- Planning Commissions might lose touch with regulations
- Still fuzzy to explain to the public



3

SCENARIO #3: CO-PLANNING: This scenario creates a new advisory co-planning committee that would include representatives from both Planning Commissions, Zoning Boards or Development Review Boards and possibly the Selectboard and Trustees. It would encourage collaboration but would have no statutory power.

Committee members would be jointly appointed by the Trustees and Selectboard. The Committee would meet a few to several times a year (likely bi-annually to quarterly). This scenario maintains separate Planning Commissions and Zoning Boards/Development Review Boards. There would be two municipal plans and two sets of bylaws, which would be adopted in the same manner they are today.

EXAMPLE

To some degree it's like a "lite" version of the Mad River Valley Planning District Commission with a primary focus on creating a formal way for the boards to have dialogue and foster collaboration. The Mad River District supports a variety of long range planning efforts including serving as the primary planner for all three towns. All towns maintain separate Planning Commissions and Development Review Boards.

Working Group Comments:

Pros

- Formalize communication among boards

Cons

- Another layer of government
- Increased burdens on staff to make it happen
- Off-putting to citizens
- We're already doing it, in a less formal way

4

SCENARIO #4: JOINT PLANNING: This scenario creates a formal Joint Planning Commission as enabled under State Statute (VSA Title 24, Chapter 117, Subchapter 2). Planning Commissioners would be appointed by the Selectboard, as required by statute, with the possibility of establishing a formal process by which Trustees could nominate members and /or make recommendations. It maintains separate Development Review Boards that would be appointed by their respective legislative bodies.

The rationale for pairing a Joint Planning Commission with Development Review Boards (as opposed to Zoning Boards) relates to work load. Current board members and staff noted that a Joint Planning Commission would have a difficult time managing the

demands of a unified planning effort along with the majority of development review across the two parts of town.

Under this model, Essex would move towards the adoption of a single Municipal Plan. There would be two sets of bylaws that would be updated by their respective legislative bodies. The Town and Village attorneys have advised that Municipal Charter changes would be necessary to create a Joint Planning Commission and Development Review Boards.

EXAMPLE

Woodstock has one Planning Commission and separate Development Review Boards. It has one municipal plan and two sets of zoning regulations. Woodstock has had a single Planning Commission since the 1970s and never had to adopt a formal Joint Planning Commission structure. It moved from separate Zoning Boards of Adjustment to separate Development Review Boards around 2000. The Town Selectboard and Village Trustees jointly adopt Commissioners and each adopts members to their respective DRBs.

Every five years the Woodstock Planning Commission updates its municipal plan. The year after plan adoption it updates the Town bylaws and then the following year it updates the Village bylaws. The Plan is adopted jointly by the Selectboard and Trustees following public hearings, which are also jointly held. Bylaw changes are adopted by either the Town Selectboard or Village Trustees as necessary.

Working Group Comments:

Pros

- Not so many plans to update
- Might be a way to get Village and Town outside the Village balance in communication, visioning, understanding of concerns
- Moves us towards recognizing that we are one town
- Mirrors economic development comm. Tells whole story
- Easy to understand, public is ready for it, palatable, streamlines government
- Balances out work load
- Increased opportunity for shared vision, more cohesive
- Efficient use of resources
- Greater focus, pulls more of community into long range planning
- Diminish line between Village and Town outside the Village
- The merging of visions
- Developers have one plan to work off of

Cons

- Would require one-time outside consulting to implement transition
- Public perception that this is part of a plot to merge Village and Town outside the Village
- Differences between Village and Town outside the Village bylaws, could be seen as favoring one or another
- Village vision for 5 Corners doesn't equal town vision for 5 Corners, maybe
- Ditto Town Center, would need resolving
- Possibly a rocky transition



SCENARIO #5: THE WHOLE ENCHILADA

This scenario creates a formal Joint Planning Commission and Joint Development Review Board. Planning Commissioners and Development Review Board members would be appointed by the

Selectboard, as required by statute, with the possibility of establishing a formal process by which Trustees could nominate members and /or make recommendations. There would be one municipal plan and one set of bylaws. As with the appointment process it could be possible to establish a formal mechanism by which the Trustees could recommend changes to the municipal plan and/or bylaws. Updates to the municipal plan could be adopted at Town Meeting and bylaw changes would be adopted by the Town Selectboard. The Village could still adopt special plans and bylaws that would apply only in the Village. The Town and Village attorneys have advised that Municipal Charter changes would be necessary to create a Joint Planning Commission and a Joint Development Review Board.

EXAMPLE

The Town and Village of Waterbury have had a Joint Planning Commission, combined Municipal Plan, and combined Zoning Regulations for over twenty years and made the switch from separate Zoning Boards of Adjustment to a Joint Development Review Board in 2012. Board appointments are made by the Town Selectboard with Village Trustees input. Both the Selectboard and Trustees vote to adopt the municipal plan and bylaw

amendments. In the case where a bylaw change only affects the Village then only the Trustees vote on the amendment.

Working Group Comments:

Pros

- Not so many plans to update
- Might lend itself to staff located near each other
- Simple and straight-forward
- Long-range planning, balance of Village and Town outside the Village
- Goes with trends of consolidation in Essex (education, public works)
- Lends itself to 4-6 neighborhood planning groups that would actually review projects (like Burlington)
- A single group handling all applications streamlines workload
- Easier for developers
- Signals solidarity – a single community with joint interests

Cons

- Would require one-time outside consulting to implement transition
- Overwhelming workload for DRB
- Doesn't have DRBs that can focus on particular areas of the town, its bylaws, culture, and philosophy
- Increased workload for DRB
- Might be perceived as a conspiracy to merge Essex
- Residents might not feel they have personal attention
- Too fast, raises fears of merger

RECOMMENDATIONS

This section lays out structural and non-structural recommendations for the Town of Essex Selectboard and Village of Essex Junction Trustees to consider.

Structural Recommendations

The primary charge of TGIA was to come up with a recommendation on any structural changes to the current boards and commissions. The recommendations in this report are the result of an iterative process of exploring a variety of planning governance options as detailed in previous sections.

The Working Group made its decisions by consensus. The group's facilitators used a tool called the "orange line" to determine consensus on different choices during the project. The idea is that for key decisions, the group works to get above the orange line – to the place where participants could at least live with a choice.

During the final Working Group session members used a straw poll to indicate their preferences for three "end destinations"; the idea that over time Essex would move towards one of these end points for planning governance. The end destinations presented were:

#1: Joint Planning

- Joint Planning Commission
- Separate Development Review Boards
- Joint Municipal Plan & Separate Bylaws

#2: Whole Enchilada

- Joint Planning Commission
- Joint Development Review Board
- Joint Municipal Plan & Joint Bylaws

#3: TBD, Wait and See

- Start with changing to separate Development Review Boards and see how that initial change goes before deciding on other changes.

Here are the results of the straw poll:



End Destination: Joint Planning

10 - It is my first choice

11 - I could live with it

0 - I need more info before deciding

0 - I am opposed to it



End Destination: Whole Enchilada

7 - It is my first choice

8 - I could live with it

2 - I need more info before deciding

4 - I am opposed to it



End Destination: TBD, Wait & See

2 - It is my first choice

10 - I could live with it

1 - I need more info before deciding

8 - I am opposed to it

The straw poll results indicated consensus on one end destination: Joint Planning.

RECOMMENDATION #1:

MOVE TO CREATE A JOINT PLANNING COMMISSION AND TWO SEPARATE DEVELOPMENT REVIEW BOARDS.

This recommendation would create a formal Joint Planning Commission as enabled under State Statute. Planning Commissioners would be appointed by the Selectboard with the possibility of establishing a formal process by which Trustees could nominate members and /or make recommendations. It would create two separate Development Review Boards that would be appointed by their respective legislative bodies. Essex would also move towards the adoption of a single Municipal Plan over time. There would be two sets of bylaws that would be adopted by their respective legislative bodies (i.e. Selectboard or Trustees).

RECOMMENDATION #2:

USE A PHASED APPROACH TO STRUCTURAL CHANGES.

The transition to a different governance structure will require a thoughtful and deliberate approach. As appropriate, changes should be phased in order to evaluate whether they are producing a more effective planning governance structure.

RECOMMENDATION #3:

EMPOWER BOARDS TO ESTABLISH A TIMEFRAME AND WORK WITH STAFF TO MAKE A PLAN FOR TRANSITION.

The Town Selectboard and Village Trustees are ultimately responsible for making decisions about what changes will occur. TGIA encourages both bodies to coordinate with their respective

Planning Commissions, Zoning Boards of Adjustment and Community Development staffs to ensure any transition occurs as smoothly as possible. In addition, the broader community should be kept informed about transition plans and provided with opportunities to provide input when appropriate.

What Would Change?

The Town and Village would go from a completely separate planning structure to planning together around a long range vision and policy while maintaining their own development review processes.



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

While TGIA did not prescribe a transition pathway, project materials do lay out a conceptual timeline (see Scenarios 2.0 document from Working Group Session #4). The timeline was presented to show the types of activities that would occur. Those activities include:

Changes to Municipal Charters: Counsel for both the Town and Village have recommended charter changes in order to enable the creation of a Joint Planning Commission and Development Review Boards. Changes would need to be first approved at the annual Town and Village meetings and then passed by the State Legislature.



Appointment processes for boards: The Selectboard and Trustees would need to develop a process for making appointments to a Joint Planning Commission and their respective Development Review Boards. Also, they would need to determine how they would transition existing board members into new roles if desired.



Adoption of new planning structures: The Selectboard and Trustees would need to formally adopt a Joint Planning Commission and their respective Development Review Boards. These changes can be made by votes of the two legislative bodies. They would also need to think through how to ensure consistent communication among the boards.



Updates to the Municipal Plan: The Town and Village would need to work towards the development of a unified Municipal Plan. Currently, the State of Vermont requires updates every five years so a unified plan should be aligned with the next statutory deadline if the timing makes sense in the context of other changes. There is a move towards changing the five-year update requirement to ten years, which could affect this element of the transition plan.



Updates to Bylaws: Bylaw updates would be necessary to reflect the shift of review powers to the Development Review Board. Bylaw updates can be made by vote by the Selectboard and Trustees.



Transition plan for projects under review: Votes(s) creating the Development Review Boards must be timed so that all work of the existing Zoning Boards of Appeal would be completed and there could be a window of time to get the Development Review Board members appointed, addressing any changes necessary to Planning Commission membership and establishing rules of procedure. Ideally, this transition happens at a slower time of year for applications, likely in the later months of the year. Boards can adopt the new planning structure and note a future date at which point the change would go into effect thereby providing ample transition time.



Consideration of the allocation of staff responsibilities: The total level of work by staff does not change dramatically under the recommended governance structure. In the short term, the need for staff or outside support would increase to assist with any transition plan. Longer term, it's likely that staff responsibilities may shift particularly in terms of how a Joint Planning Commission would be supported.



Development of a community education and input process: Based on the community input into TGIA and discussion at Working Group sessions there is a clear need to think through how any changes would be communicated with the broader community and how, when appropriate, input would be sought on the specifics of those changes.



Consideration of non-structural changes: There are other changes that could complement any structural changes made (see next section). In some cases, these may be best time in advance, concurrently or after structural changes.



Each of these activities would require careful consideration and time on the parts of boards and staff.

Non-Structural Recommendations

The secondary charge of TGIA was to come up with recommendations related to how to improve community engagement in planning. Much of the community input TGIA received could be addressed more effectively through changes related to community engagement.

While the Working Group did not get to a detailed set of recommendations, it developed and assessed general ideas that would address the project's findings related to community engagement. This section describes the ideas and then presents the results of an Impact Feasibility Assessment conducted by the Working Group.

COMMUNICATIONS 2.0

The following ideas are aimed at improving planning communications efforts in Essex:

Develop local partnerships. Essex has a history of working with local organizations and groups to help spread the word about projects (e.g. asking to post event info in school newsletters or through community Facebook pages). Most of these arrangements are ad hoc but it is possible to formalize partnerships to more easily share information across a variety of projects. Potential partners include the schools, recreation departments and libraries.

Research new ways to communicate. Essex already communicates in many ways – local papers, Front Porch Forum, newsletters, etc. - and there is always room for improvement. Communications is about message and medium; it's about what you say *and* how you say it that matters in the community context. The first step is to determine how people want to receive information from their community (e.g., a short survey or interactive board at Town Meeting could be one way to collect this info). Then it's possible to figure out what tools will work best and in budget.

Target communication. Regardless of what channels are being used, messages today need to be targeted towards specific audiences. In addition, the type of planning issue or project being featured will influence how to structure communications.

Use communications channels consistently. Once it's known how best to communicate information, then those approaches must be used consistently. This consistency will help build clearer expectations about how information will be shared and where people can go to get news. The Town's Community Development staff noted that they are already creating a Communications Plan as a result of this effort, which is a great step towards institutionalizing best practices.

PARTICIPATION 2.0

The following ideas are aimed at improving public participation in planning in Essex:

Make planning easy to understand. While planning deals with complex issues it is possible to develop resources that break down the basics for people. These resources will enable people to more easily and productively participate in planning discussions. There are a variety of resources already available on general planning topics through organizations like the [Vermont Planners Association](#), [Vermont League of Cities and Towns](#) and the [American Planning Association](#). However, resources tailored to Essex's specific situation will be more helpful to residents.

Make meetings easy to understand. Municipal meetings must follow certain protocols to stay in line with open meetings laws. While the structure of some meetings can feel formal and intimidating it is possible to take steps to make them more inviting

and understandable to people who are new to municipal processes. Examples include:

- Provide a meeting hand-out explaining the basic purpose of the meeting, guidelines on participation and where meetings agendas/summaries are posted.
- Board chairs could state upfront a meeting's purpose and how and when members of the public will be invited to share their questions or concerns.
- Show/share a roadmap of decision making at every meeting so participants know where they are in the process.

The Town's recent development of a [Public Participation Guide](#) is an example of this kind of approach.

Research new participation methods and tools. As with communications, it's important to first understand what general ways people would want to engage in planning issues. TGIA has identified some community interest in greater online options and neighborhood options but there could be others. Generally, communities are well served to provide a mix of group and individual opportunities to participate in addition to the required meetings and hearings.

Explore potential of neighborhood planning structures. TGIA and the Essex Governance Group identified the potential for neighborhood planning structures to add value to planning in Essex. There is some precedent to using neighborhoods in planning in Vermont. Some of these examples are detailed in materials developed for the fourth Working Group session.

Develop a public participation ordinance. Much of the law regarding public participation is outdated and does not match the variety of participatory tools available today. A public participation ordinance is one helpful tool to help empower local decision makers with more of a legal framework to support community engagement. A model ordinance, along with several other helpful tools, can be found in the 2013 [Making Participation Legal](#) published by Deliberative Democracy Consortium.

Assessing participation ideas



OPEN ACCESS

The following ideas are aimed at improving access to information in Essex:

Develop a quarterly municipal boards newsletter. This newsletter could be a resource for municipal boards, staff and residents alike. The Village Newsletter serves as a local example of a successful newsletter. A quarterly schedule may be a reasonable schedule for a newsletter that would cover both Town and Village boards and simple report forms could be developed for board chairs and staff to use to provide content for the newsletter.

Develop an online system for tracking development applications. Right now most people would find it difficult to know what developments are being proposed in their part of town. While this information is available if you go to the town offices for it, a more easier and transparent option could help residents be aware of what's happening in their own neighborhood. For instance, the City of Burlington has an [online system](#) where anyone can find out what development applications have been submitted and what stage of review they are in; applications are available in a sortable table (by address) or on a Google Map.

Develop an open access data portal. Many cities are providing greater access to municipal related data. This access creates greater transparency and can spur local citizen analysis and innovation. Burlington provides another local example of a city that has created an [open data portal](#). Types of information available include: public works permits, police logs, rental housing, property assessments, and city budget info.

HUMAN RESOURCES

The following ideas are aimed at supporting the human capital of community engagement in Essex:

Support board member training. There are a variety of existing training programs available in VT, possibilities for developed tailored programs in partnership with other partners, and ways to help build skills locally. Some board members do take advantage of programs offered through state programs like the VT League of Cities and Towns, Vermont Planners Association or the State of VT and both the Town and Village cover these costs. However, most out of the box trainings are held at times and places that are not convenient for volunteer board members. A variety of ideas for addressing board training are detailed in materials developed for the fourth Working Group session.

Consider co-location of Community Development Staff. This idea has been raised through this process and is under consideration by the Town Manager. It could be convenient to residents to have both departments together and beneficial for staff to have more face-to-face time to enable opportunities for interaction and collaboration. However, department re-location is a facilities management question and would need to consider the value of co-locating other departments that residents frequently use together.

Consider re-allocation of resources to support staffing dedicated to communications and public participation. While a number of staff members currently undertake these activities as part of their work there could be benefit to a more focused approach where one staff person is dedicated to providing communications and engagement support across a variety of projects and possibly across

Town and Village departments. This person could be a go-to resource to town departments, develop relationships with a variety of local partners, and stay current on best practices in community engagement.

Engage community member volunteers. While municipal staff will always play a role in public participation it's also possible to build a volunteer corp to assist with aspects of the participation effort. This may be particularly useful in the case of any kind of neighborhood based engagement.

Form a community engagement working group. The TGIA Working Group made progress on issues of planning governance structure and produced thoughtful reflections on community engagement. However, these ideas will not be as fully discussed and vetted as the structural aspects of the project so one possibility is to form a new working group to carry the engagement ideas forward.

ASSESSMENT

TGIA Working Group members used an impact feasibility assessment to rate each idea on the following scales:

Impact on community understanding and participation in planning – high, medium, low

Feasibility of idea to be implemented (e.g. funding, political will, legal, etc.) – high, medium, low

The results of the impact feasibility exercise are on the next page. The ideas along with their nicknames (used to illustrate how ideas

rated in the impact feasibility chart on next page) are provided here in summary form for reference:

Communications 2.0

- Develop local partnerships. PARTNERSHIPS
- Research new ways to communicate. RESEARCH COMM
- Use/continue communications channels consistently. CONSISTENT COMM
- Target communication. TARGET COMM

Participation 2.0

- Make planning easy to understand. EASY PLANNING
- Make meetings easy to understand. EASY MEETINGS
- Research new participation methods and tools. RESEARCH PART
- Explore potential of neighborhood planning structures. NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING
- Develop a public participation ordinance. ORDINANCE

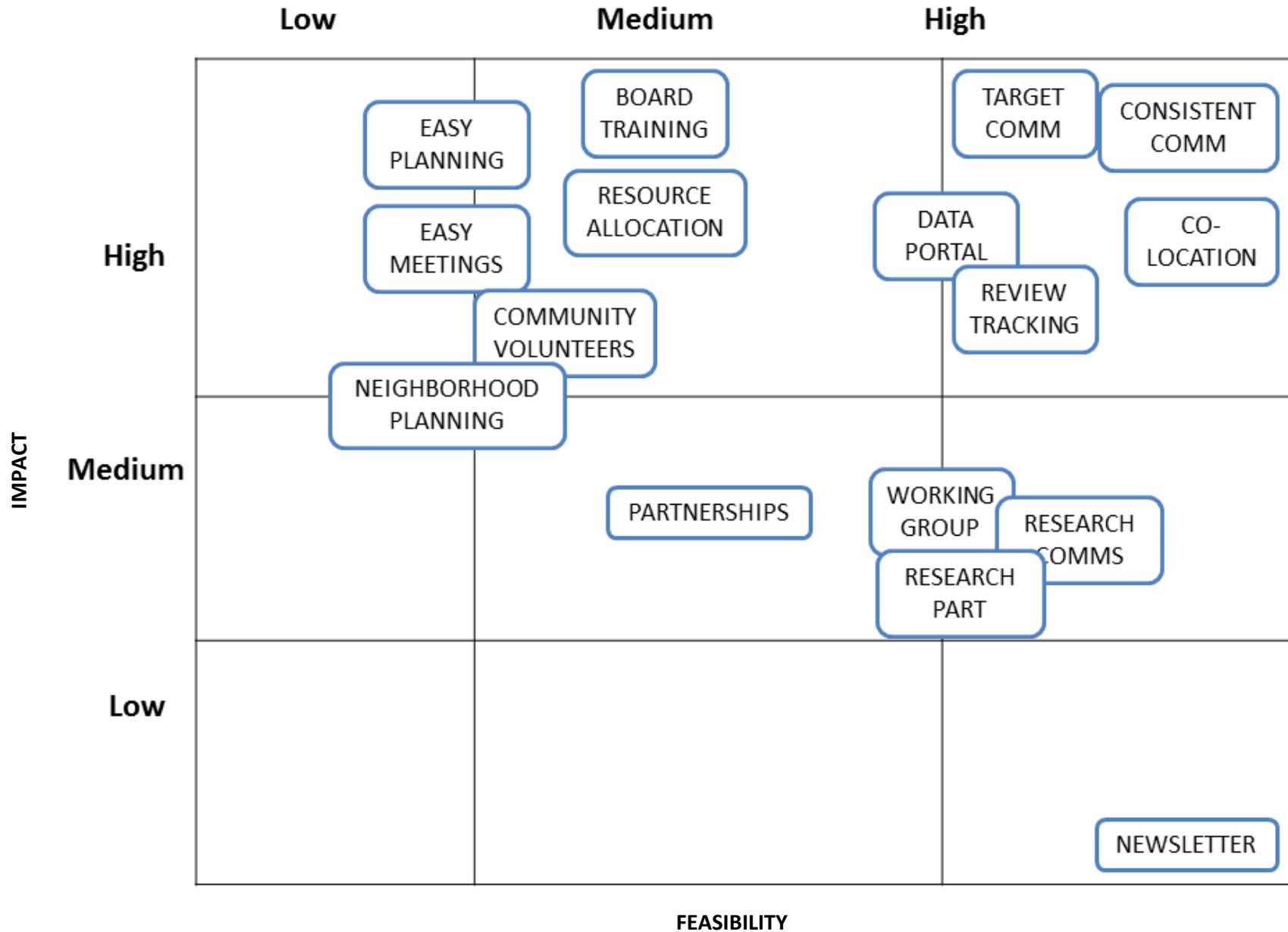
Open Access

- Develop a quarterly municipal boards newsletter. NEWSLETTER
- Develop an online system for tracking development applications. REVIEW TRACKING
- Develop an open access data portal. DATA PORTAL

Human Resources

- Support board member training. BOARD TRAINING
- Consider co-location of Community Development Staff. CO-LOCATION
- Consider re-allocation of resources to support staffing dedicated to communications and public participation. RESOURCE ALLOCATION
- Engage community member volunteers. COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS
- Form a community engagement working group. WORKING GROUP

Impact Feasibility Matrix



Several themes emerged from the discussion around the Working Group's assessment of ideas:

- Improving messaging and communications around planning are of high importance.
- There is potential to increase transparency of planning through online tools but also a need to assess how existing models are working (e.g. Burlington or Colchester's data portals).
- There is interest in allocating resources to support engagement and ensuring board volunteers are trained.
- The desire to ensure that efforts focused on improving community participation continue.

The upcoming project in partnership with Essex Heart & Soul could offer a seamless way to carry forward the community participation findings and ideas found as part of the TGIA effort. Heart & Soul will be working with Matt Leighninger, Executive Director of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, to incorporate public engagement skills and expectations into all job descriptions, hiring expectations, and performance reviews for municipal staff in the Town and Village. There will also be a one-day workshop for engagement leaders (inside and outside government) to help build their engagement skills.

Community Reaction

At the second Community Workshop, participants had a chance to weigh in with their reactions to the project's findings and recommendations. Here is a summary of that input:

1. What resonated with you?

- Strong consensus in favor of the 1 Planning Commission, 2 Development Review Board model
 - One Planning Commission will be able to spend more time on long range planning
 - A good "first step" toward "big enchilada" (consolidated planning and development review)
 - Improves citizen "access" and civic engagement
- More efficient use of staff
 - Streamlining, better process
 - Redistribution and shared staffing will be good
 - Opportunity to co-locate staff
 - Better communication, shared info
- New model allows one Essex vision
 - Honors the urban/rural split
 - Keeps uniqueness of Town and Village
 - Increases chances of preserving open space, preserving/improving sidewalks

2. What concerned you?

- The risk of disconnection
 - [Citizen engagement] better if close to government, big government is less responsive
 - What are mechanisms for appeal: will citizens feel comfortable going to Development Review Board?

- Always risk of Development Review Board being disconnected from planning processes
- Too complex: more streamlining needed (1 board, 1 plan, 1 code, etc.)
- How do we develop and implement the municipal plan?
 - Certain district's priorities?
 - What about interim? Don't want to make development "mistakes"
 - Risk of Development Review Board affecting growth, economic development [negatively]
 - Aesthetics – a concern of many residents who have not attended meetings
- Staffing Resources, financial resources and board member selection
 - What happens to staff?
 - How would Planning Commission members be selected: need equal geographical split in representation to Planning Commission: Shared appointments would be best (SB and Trustees)
 - Only so many planning financial resources: need to ensure we can get at those.

- Structures for improved communication
 - Between Planning Commission and Development Review Board to stay strong and grounded
 - Have Planning Commission and two Development Review Boards meet jointly annually to stay in sync?
 - Staff should start meetings of Development Review Board by summing up where we are and how much input is welcomed.

A full summary of the workshop proceedings can be found in this report's Appendix.

3. Was there anything missing from your perspective?

- Some stakeholders are absent [need outreach?]
 - Opposing views from one or two municipal entities
 - Renters
 - "People not here tonight will not be in favor of consolidation"
- No plans in place for staffing changes
 - Co-locating staff?
 - Merging staff?
- Most board members don't have design review training



MOVING FORWARD

Essex is undergoing a transformation in the way it thinks about the relationship between the Town and Village. Recent community efforts have pointed to the desire for greater collaboration that strengthens the physical character and social fabric of the community as a whole. Yet, there is also a desire to move ahead carefully to ensure that the unique aspects and priorities of each part of the community are not lost, and that potential changes consider financial and other resource implications.

TGIA focused on exploring different approaches to planning governance that could illuminate a new path forward that responds to the desire for greater collaboration while maintaining the Town and Village's distinctiveness. While TGIA puts forward a set of recommendations its utility is also in the analysis of different issues and ideas. The hope is that this "why" will be helpful to the Selectboard and Trustees as they consider potential planning governance changes.

