

Town of Essex Community Development Strategy

Goals and Objectives

The goals of the Town of Essex Community Development Strategy (CDS) are several-fold: First, the CDS is intended to crystallize community-based planning and priority setting from past efforts in order that those needs identified as being most critical may be addressed by appropriate project funding and/or implementation. Since past planning efforts were intended to develop a comprehensive prioritization of community planning needs and projects over a broad spectrum of planning themes, the CDS will ensure that public resources at the local, State, and Federal levels are directed at high priority issues.

Second, the CDS will draw upon the prioritized needs noted above and will outline a plan of action intended to accomplish specific goals that will positively impact the community. Implementation of specific projects and activities to accomplish specific goals will require a comprehensive, integrated approach to ensure that each action supports the overall planning direction and desired character of the community.

Third, the CDS will demonstrate how the community's priorities are consistent with the Commonwealth's Sustainable Development Principles such as promoting compact development; expanding housing opportunities; revitalizing brownfields and abandoned buildings; implementing EO 418 Community Development Plans; protecting open space; and preserving working natural landscapes.

Scope and Outlook

The CDS is calibrated to what the Town may expect to accomplish over the next three to five-year period and will be updated from time to time as priority projects are completed and secondary priorities take center-stage or as new priorities emerge based on changing circumstances, conditions, or public input. The CDS should be considered a "living" document.

Approach, Content, and Format

The most comprehensive planning effort to date in the Town of Essex has been the EO 418 Community Development Plan (CDP) process – a community-based needs assessment and planning tool aimed at capturing and prioritizing meaningful planning goals with the input and assistance of a diverse public audience. The CDP, coupled with other planning efforts and implementation projects such as the Town's Open Space Plan (OSP); a recent Public Works Economic Development (PWED) grant; a recent Community Development Action Grant (CDAG); a recent Brownfields grant; and a soon-to-be-implemented intermodal transportation project (Route 133 Reconstruction Project) serve to well-demonstrate a truly community-driven priority setting process of late. Each of these tools and implementation vehicles are replete with input from and the support of the general public and Town officials alike. The CDP incorporated multiple public forums and workshops to create an overall roadmap as a place to start and projects that have since been completed have begun to weave the fabric of integrated planning desired by Essex. The CDS is part of the natural progression in the Town's community development program and brings actual implementation of the CDP (a publicly-funded and State-approved process) to the forefront. A portion of the language found in this CDS is taken directly from the CDP and assertions made herein are supported in great detail by that document.

The CDS was first presented and discussed at a public hearing on March 13, 2006. The hearing was intended to highlight the overall planning status and future community development thrust in the Town and to specifically receive input regarding a newly-emerged need – the replacement of the Town's existing Senior Center. The document is organized by highlighting the top priorities in each of four planning themes in a fashion similar to the CDP (themes include Natural Resources and Open Space,

Housing, Economic Development, and Transportation). Also, included in each theme are projects that have already been completed, projects that will soon begin, and/or initiatives that have been tried and have failed - in order to provide the best picture of planning goals and actual follow-up actions intended to advance community goals on a variety of fronts. As a final synthesis, the CDS concludes with a prioritized list of projects drawn from the various themes that the Town intends to undertake in order to address community development goals.

Top Issues within Planning Themes

Natural Resources and Open Space

Protection of specific natural resource and open space areas was prioritized in the CDP and the top three protection initiatives have been identified as a reasonable focus over the next three to five years. The Town's approach to this theme is primarily to acquire important properties using Town and/or private conservation organization funds to the extent possible. The kind of efforts outlined below are very much supported by the Town's Open Space Plan as well.

Hardy's Hatchery/Vitale/Benotti Parcels. The Hardy Hatchery land contains Priority Sites of Rare Species Habitat, Endangered Species Habitat, Supporting Natural Landscape and wetlands designations. The Benotti parcel contains wetlands and Supporting Natural Habitat. Recently, the Hardy's Hatchery site was sold and was previously under an agricultural restriction. However, unfortunately, neither the Town nor a local conservation group had sufficient funds to purchase the site outright. The Town worked with the local conservation group to attempt to negotiate and purchase a conservation restriction that would survive the sale but those efforts were unsuccessful. The goal was to utilize a conservation restriction to preserve the character of this historic working landscape and open space. The Town is once again bringing to the voters the potential adoption of the Community Preservation Act (CPA) so that future potential sales regarding similar properties may be considered by the Town by exercise of the Town's right of first refusal (among other uses of CPA funds).

The **South Essex Woods** parcels, including the following lots:

- A) The approximately 9-acre Parsonage lot that was given to a local church in 1710. The Manchester Essex Community Trust (MECT) owns land just to the north of it and the church owned parcel is exempt from MGL 40-A. This is a key piece of land to the effort by MECT to assemble and protect the South Essex Woods, as it is centrally located. It is a Priority Site for Species Habitat and Core Habitat as well.
- B) Various town owned tax title parcels of about 20-acres in total. These tax delinquent lands are mostly wetlands, Core Habitat and Priority Sites of Rare Species Habitat areas.
- C) Maple Swamp area of about 50-acres. This is potential tax-title land that contains wetlands, Core Habitat and Priority Species of Rare Habitat designations.

Alewife Brook Buffer between Pond Street and Essex Park or from Library to Chebacco Lake. This area contains Supporting Habitat for Anadromous Fish, is in the town's Wellhead Protection Area, provides Supporting Natural Landscape, wetlands and Core Habitat.

Housing

According to the CDP, young families and senior populations are particularly burdened and in light of current wait lists for subsidized housing units, the need will likely increase in the future. Additional efforts are needed to meet their needs, along with the needs of all income groups for a greater diversity of housing types to choose from in the future. Essex has a documented need for more senior and

handicapped accessible affordable housing. Essex can expect significant growth in empty-nesters and, later, early seniors.

With the above in mind, it will be necessary for the Town to approach the future by considering strong senior planning efforts that will be bolstered by working closely with the Council on Aging and by providing a quality Senior Center that will enable the senior population to congregate and to plan and speak with a common voice. The present Senior Center (known as the Scout House/Council on Aging Center) was, subsequent to the CDP process, deemed by the Building Inspector to require a variety of spot-fixes just to allow for continued occupancy. Those small items have been corrected but major structural issues with the wooden and brick pillar foundation and with elements on the second floor have caused the Building Inspector to deem the second floor "off-limits" and to carefully monitor the foundation pillars since they will likely be deemed unsafe in the near future – translating to the loss of the use of the building. Further, the building is in extremely poor overall condition and needs much interior and exterior improvement work. It is estimated that the work necessary to rehabilitate the existing building will be far more costly than an outright replacement of the building. As such, the replacement of the Senior Center (a "re-develop first" approach in the heart of the downtown area) is the Town's first priority relative to future housing planning and enhancement of a suitable living environment for the Town's senior population and that population's other associated issues.

Many housing issues outlined in the CDP suggested a focus is necessary on future zoning study and potential changes. Relative to the promotion of compact development, redevelopment using the "re-develop first" concept, and affordable housing, and expanding housing opportunities, the CDP highlighted a variety of ideas and options as follows:

It would be useful to allow accessory apartments on existing lots and make it permissible for an apartment to be a separate structure if design/safety/parking requirements are met. Also, conversion of large single-family homes to multiple apartment units or condos should be encouraged.

In the Causeway area of the downtown, uses with retail/light commercial on first floor and residential ranging from 1-3 units and 4-6 units on upper floor(s) should be encouraged – providing for the integration of economic development with the other goals listed above.

Along the Route 22 Corridor, Pond Street to the Hamilton line, residential development should be encouraged with new limits on industrial/heavy commercial.

On Laurel Lane, the potential exists for multi-unit affordable housing with mixed ages.

Along Eastern Avenue, from Main Street to the Gloucester line, the Town should limit commercial development and propose residential.

Along John Wise Avenue, from Western Avenue/Pickering Street to the Ipswich line, the Town should promote lower density residential housing and land conservation via Open Space Residential Design (OSRD). Presently, the Planning Board is putting forth to the Town for the Annual Town Meeting in May of 2006 a new, OSRD By-law developed using grant funding that will enable this approach in all areas of the Town if accepted.

In the Western Avenue/Martin Street Triangle area, the Town should consider a higher density mixed use area with restricted commercial uses.

Economic Development

Prioritized Economic Development Goals are as follows and the Town's general approach to this theme is to focus a variety of projects on the downtown area with attention also given to overall Town character issues.

The Town has made great strides recently regarding economic development measures. A PWED grant obtained by the Town provided the Town with a new, central parking facility in the downtown area intended to support parking for new jobs created via new, private building construction in the immediate area and to provide parking for visitors to the Town. A CDAG grant obtained by the Town provided for a new sewer pump station with public restrooms to provide visitors with restroom facilities and to provide downtown businesses with a permanent wastewater solution. A Brownfields grant obtained by the Essex Shipbuilding Museum provided for the cleanup of pollutants from a historic boat yard (a historic landscape in the downtown area) that will continue to be used for museum projects and will continue to attract visitors to the Town. The CDAG and PWED projects both referenced a downtown building that is presently abandoned but will be rehabilitated, likely into mixed commercial and residential use, in the near future. All of the above efforts included numerous public hearings and community input sessions in order that the Town's economic development thrust would be based on a wide variety of viewpoints and needs.

In the future, the Town will be looking toward priorities established in the CDP for continued economic development opportunities as follows:

Encourage entrepreneurs in home occupations/small businesses, farms, and shellfishing.

The lack of separate business districts buffered from residences can lead to nuisance conditions (noise, truck traffic, odors). More active enforcement of existing rules would help in some instances but would require more staff resources being applied (e.g. one building inspector now shared with Gloucester). Residents have a long standing tradition of being able to operate businesses in or adjacent to homes and the Town wants to maintain that opportunity. It may be possible to phase in any regulations for reducing impacts so that people have a chance to adjust their plans.

Carefully manage siting of larger commercial and industrial uses.

Any business can now locate anywhere in town if the parcel size is large enough and wastewater disposal requirements are met. Design reviews may help in buffering impacts of developments even if separate business districts are not designated.

Manage growth through public dialogue and participation and provide public information sources such as a town web-site.

Most residents are unaware that the town's zoning by-law is relatively unusual and allows all types of uses everywhere in the town rather than identifying specific districts for commercial and residential. Education/publicity of the potential negative impacts of the current zoning (i.e. projects being proposed in inappropriate locations) might increase support for designating commercial and residential districts. The Town should explore establishing a long-term planning committee. A Town web site has been established and may now be used as a tool for this type of information.

Use planning/zoning and financial tools to achieve a sound balance between conservation and appropriate development.

The current zoning provides no balance, but instead allows any kind of development to occur anywhere. With development increasing in communities surrounding Essex and alternatives to septic systems now available, it is only a matter of time before developers propose large projects that will be inappropriate

to the scale and desires of the community. The planning board will be unable to stop such projects despite the objections of neighbors. The Town should explore establishing districts where commercial/industrial uses are permitted by right and districts where businesses are not allowed. However, a master plan with such districts was voted down in the 1980s. The Town should identify models of zoning used by other rural Massachusetts communities that are becoming more suburban.

Strengthen Essex as a tourist destination

Identify and promote attractions that will extend the stays of visitors to the Town's restaurants. Explore expanding cooperation with neighboring towns and among attractions such as the Shipbuilding Museum, Little Farm (SPNEA), and Crane's Beach. The recent Brownfields grant obtained by the museum will further these goals.

Support/maintain the clamming industry

The number of clambers has declined because productivity of beds has fallen and closures are common after rainfall. The Town should support efforts to increase production and better manage the resource, e.g. by eventually creating a rotation plan to allow the flats to recover.

Transportation

Transportation Goals are presently being approached with a strong focus on the downtown area and these goals are very much integrated with the Town's Economic Development Goals. According to the CDP, the Main Street/Causeway area of the Route 133 corridor in Essex needs much improvement in relation to vehicular and pedestrian safety, ease of access to the businesses along the causeway, and flow of traffic. The Town is presently programmed for a comprehensive reconstruction project funded by the State and Federal Governments under the FY06 element in the Transportation Improvement Program. Much public input, particularly from the business community in that area, has yielded a reconstruction plan that the Massachusetts Highway Department supports while keeping the needs of area inhabitants and the character of the Town in the forefront.

Prioritized List and Action Plan for Implementation of Community Development Projects/Activities

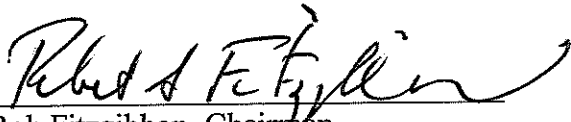
The following action items represent a tangible plan for furthering community development in Essex and serve to present an integrated planning roadmap covering a variety of planning themes:

1. The replacement of the existing Senior Center is the Town's first priority. The Town will be applying for CDBG-CDF1 funding in March of 2006 in an effort to address this need. If funded, the project will be implemented beginning in the summer of 2006 and may extend to late 2007.
2. The successful implementation of the Route 133 Reconstruction Project using non-CDBG State and Federal funds is next in importance. The Town has worked very closely with the Massachusetts Highway Department and the Metropolitan Planning Organization to ensure that the Reconstruction Project moves forward and the Project represents a key improvement to the downtown area starting with advertising by September of 2006 and with construction as of the spring of 2007. The project will conclude by late 2008.
3. A continued effort to bring about the passage of the Community Preservation Act is the Town's third priority. The Town considered the Act in the past and turned it down. However, in the Town Election that will occur in May of 2006, the Town will again consider the Act with great support from the Board of Selectmen, the Planning Board, and the Finance Committee. Passage of the Act would translate to the accumulation of local tax surcharge funds and non-CDBG State matching funds that could be used to purchase open space or exercise rights of first refusal if properties come out of agricultural or forestry use restrictions. The Town will be holding an informational forum on the Community Preservation Act presented by MAPC on April 10, 2006.

If the Act is accepted, funds will accumulate to potentially leverage open space acquisition over the next 3-5 years and beyond.

4. The Planning Board has put great effort into the development of an OSRD by-law that will be presented to Town Meeting in May of 2006. If adopted, this effort will represent the beginning of meaningful zoning changes in the Town. The Planning Board will then begin to focus on other zoning issues such as the establishment of specific zones and greater freedom relative to mixed-use and accessory apartments. Such an effort will have a positive impact on housing variety and affordability; quality of life; economic development; open space conservation; and transportation. The Planning Board will proceed in stages and will strive to bring individual issues to the Annual Town Meeting over the next three to five years and beyond.

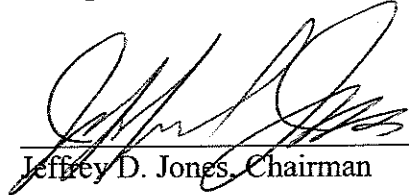
Accepted by the Essex Planning Board



Rob Fitzgibbon, Chairman

March 13, 2006

Accepted by the Essex Board of Selectmen



Jeffrey D. Jones, Chairman

March 13, 2006