

The History Behind Article 18 – Funding for Downtown Decorative Lighting

Installing pedestrian-oriented decorative lighting in downtown Essex has been a priority expressed by community members for decades, with this interest being formalized by the Long-Term Planning Committee as early as 2009. Most recently, the popular demand for downtown lighting was captured in the 2020 Essex Economic Development Plan, the 2021 Local Rapid Recovery Plan, and the 2023-2028 Essex Strategic Plan – plans that were created through extensive public outreach, focus groups, and board and committee review.

In 2009, in response to public demand for downtown lighting, the Town worked with MassDOT to install sub-surface main-line conduit and junction boxes during MassDOT's Route 133 reconstruction project. This past work made it possible to run future wiring for lighting under the Main Street sidewalks without having to dig up and replace large sections of those sidewalks. The work was paid for and completed by MassDOT and is valued at approximately \$200,000. In 2021, the Local Rapid Recovery Plan highlighted the positive impacts downtown lighting would have on pedestrian safety, downtown beautification and branding - making the downtown a safer and more enjoyable experience for residents and visitors alike, with better visibility, enhanced aesthetic appeal, and opportunities for seasonal decorations. Following up on the recommendations of the Local Rapid Recovery Plan, the Town pursued funding for the project. The Town was awarded \$15,000 in Technical Assistance from the Barr Foundation for preliminary design drawings and cost estimating, and \$160,743 through a MassDOT grant plus \$50,000 in a State Legislative earmark for engineering and installation.

Since the original cost estimate for the project, construction costs have risen sharply due to materials and labor availability changes, requiring augmenting with Town funds. The use of \$100,000 in Town funds approved at the 2022 Spring Town Meeting, and the additional \$263,126 free cash transfer being requested at this Fall Town Meeting, bring the total of the Town funds required to \$363,126, which are matched at better than 1:1 with the sum of the external funds the Town has received for this project – the Town is only paying approximately 47% of the \$773,869 total project cost to finally bring pedestrian lighting to downtown Essex. This expenditure of Town funds for initial construction is a one-time only cost - it will not be a recurring line item in the Town budget. The requested funds are roughly equivalent to one year of the Town's income from the local meals tax. This project will invest those dollars into an area of town that would benefit a great number of local businesses dependent on visitor spending, as well as an area frequented and enjoyed by residents. It is important to understand that the light poles will feature banner hangers, flag hangers, and flower hangers, along with a power outlet. This arrangement will allow the Town to vary the look and feel of the downtown area according to season for a long time to come.

If the downtown decorative street lighting project is not funded through the transfer of free cash at this 2023 Fall Town Meeting, the Town will have to return all funds to MassDOT and will have on hand useless electrical wire and other materials that have already been purchased due to State spending deadlines. Reneging on the grant contract signed between the Town and MassDOT could jeopardize future grant applications to MassDOT, as well as any future attempts to seek grant funding for this project from other sources.