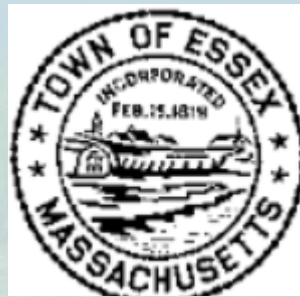


TOWN OF ESSEX STRATEGIC PLAN

2015-2020

UPDATED NOVEMBER, 2019



To the Residents of Essex:

As representatives of Town of Essex Boards and Commissions, we submit to you this five-year Strategic Plan for your consideration and feedback. This Strategic Plan was developed to help establish the Town's priorities through the year 2020.

Foundations for the Plan

The foundation of the plan is built upon the efforts of several Committees (see background reports cited in the accompanying Annex). These previous efforts include the work of the Essex Long-Term Planning Committee (LTPC), which submitted its report, *Planning to Preserve the Best of Essex*, to the Board of Selectmen in June 2015. The LTPC identified the Town's community defining resources, such as its historic and environmental assets, and recommended proactive measures to preserve the Town's vital economic, natural and recreational characteristics. Work to develop plans for the future of Conomo Point, enhance the Town's village center, improve the Town Landing, create the Downtown Boardwalk, assess the Town's public safety departments and facilities, and update the Town's Open Space Plan have also influenced the Plan's development. In that sense, this Strategic Plan does not break new ground but presents instead a clear framework for action in the years to come.

We submit this Plan to the public because we believe the goals it establishes, and the actions it suggests the Town take, will positively impact the lives of all people in Essex. In fact, one of the nine goals proposed in the Plan is to *Increase Participation in Town Government*. The work to meet that goal starts now, with publication of this Plan, in draft, for public consultation.

Developing the Plan

This Plan has been developed through a series of seven two-hour workshops facilitated by staff from the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), Greater Boston's Regional Planning Agency. Through these sessions, the Essex Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) on which we serve has worked to determine the Town's long-term priorities. The SPC is comprised of members from established Town Boards and Commissions, such as the Board of Selectmen, the Finance Committee, Planning Board and Conservation Commission, as well as representatives from key stakeholder groups such as the business and shell fishing communities. This diverse membership has ensured that a wide array of viewpoints was considered during the SPC's deliberations. The effort has also benefitted from the invaluable experience and insights of the Town Administrator Brendhan Zubricki and the Town's planner Matthew Coogan.

From this comprehensive dialogue, nine goals were agreed by the SPC, each underpinned by a set of actions to achieve those goals. These nine goals address a broad range of topic areas, from Town facilities to public safety, land conservation to school budgets. They do not address every matter confronting the Town, but we believe they address the most pressing challenges facing Essex at this time.

Joining the discussion about Essex's future

This consultation document summarizes the Plan's goals and critical actions, and invites public feedback on each. After receiving public input, the SPC will determine whether any further changes to the Plan are needed. This Plan should be considered a living document. The SPC will remain constituted to track and monitor progress in delivering this Plan and will develop a means of reporting on that progress regularly to the residents of Essex. We also recognize that priorities for the Town will no doubt change, and therefore this Plan, while providing a blueprint for action, is not set in stone and will be regularly updated to reflect evolving priorities.

Your feedback can be provided by sending an email to essexstratplan@essexma.org.

We appreciate your time and consideration for the future of Essex.

Plan revision: November, 2019

Sincerely,

Essex Strategic Planning Committee members, including:

**Lisa O'Donnell,
Board of Selectmen**

**David Gabor,
Finance Committee**

**John Bediz,
Conomo Point Committee**

**Bob Coviello,
Building Committee**

**Julia Scofield,
Open Space Committee**

**Annie Cameron,
School Committee**

**Skip Crocker,
Planning Board**

**Paul Goodwin,
Board of Public Works**

**Keith Symmes,
Council on Aging**

**Michael Burke,
Conservation Committee**

**Charlie McNeil
Shellfishing Industry**

**Peter Madsen,
Community Preservation Committee**

Ten Goals for Essex

In developing this Strategic Plan, the Essex Strategic Planning Committee considered the Town's current strengths and recent achievements alongside the ongoing challenges and expected pressures the Town would face in the years to come. The Committee noted the progress the Town had made in recent years: realizing the full value of Conomo Point; making improvements to the Village Center; sharing services with its neighboring communities, such as 911 dispatch services; and maintaining its strong fiscal position. The Committee also noted a number of pressures facing the Town, including threats to its rivers, marshes and lakes; challenges in maintaining a prosperous business community; the deterioration of vital public infrastructure; a relatively static revenue base; public services that require high-levels of volunteerism to sustain and afford; high housing costs that are pricing out long-term residents; and a civic life that lacks broad participation and does not cultivate enough new leaders.

The nine goals below were chosen to build on Essex's strengths and address the challenges it faces now and will confront in coming years. They are to:

- 1) Renew and finance critical Town infrastructure by building a new public safety facility, replacing the Memorial School in Manchester and renovating the Essex Elementary School, replacing old water system components and maintaining the Town's ten-year-old sewer system;**
- 2) Increase participation in Town government;**
- 3) Maintain and develop a strong business community;**
- 4) Increase the amount of protected land in Essex;**
- 5) Improve the health of and access to Essex's rivers and lakes;**
- 6) Expand the range of recreational opportunities and assets, particularly for young people;**
- 7) Develop and deliver a fiscally responsible school budget consistent with multi-year forecasts;**
- 8) Maintain the viability of the Town's call Fire Service; and**
- 9) Meet the housing needs of all Essex residents.**

Subsequently, in late-2019, the Essex Strategic Planning Committee added a tenth goal: Build Coastal Resilience, which had previously just been a subset of Goal Five. This goal was added in recognition of the many activities the Town has been involved with in this area and the tremendous importance that planning for climate change and sea level rise holds for the Town.

Between now and 2020, the Essex Strategic Planning Committee, the Town Board's and Commissions, and Town employees will be working to achieve these goals. The following sections of this report briefly describe the rationale behind each goal and list some of the actions the Town will take to bring them to fruition.

GOAL ONE: Renew and finance critical Town infrastructure by building a new public safety facility, the Memorial School in Manchester and renovating the Essex Elementary School, and replacing old water system components and maintaining the Town's ten-year-old sewer system

Ensuring that our Town facilities and infrastructure meet the needs of Town residents, businesses and personnel is important to the Town's long-term prosperity. It has long been the case that facilities for our Police and Fire Departments have been in disrepair, a finding again reiterated by the Public Safety Committee's recent report on the subject. To enable high-quality public safety services, the Police and Fire Departments need a new home. Similarly, the Manchester-Essex Regional School Committee (MERSD) has identified the need to address structural deficiencies in both its elementary schools within the next five to ten years and has already begun the process of working with the State School Building Assistance program to access state loans to enable such work. The Town's water infrastructure is also aging and over time will need replacement to reduce leaks, provide consistency and maintain water quality.

To achieve this goal, the Essex SPC recommends the Town take the following actions:

- a) Develop a plan for building/rebuilding the Town's public safety facility (ies), including the means of financing such improvements.
- b) Develop a school reconstruction plan with Manchester, including financing, for renovating the Essex elementary school and replacing the Manchester elementary school.
- c) Develop plan to replace (and finance) 18-20 miles of old water mains and remove asbestos cement mains, as well as address other long-term water and sewer system needs, such as filtration.
- d) Examine opportunities to dispose of surplus town properties.



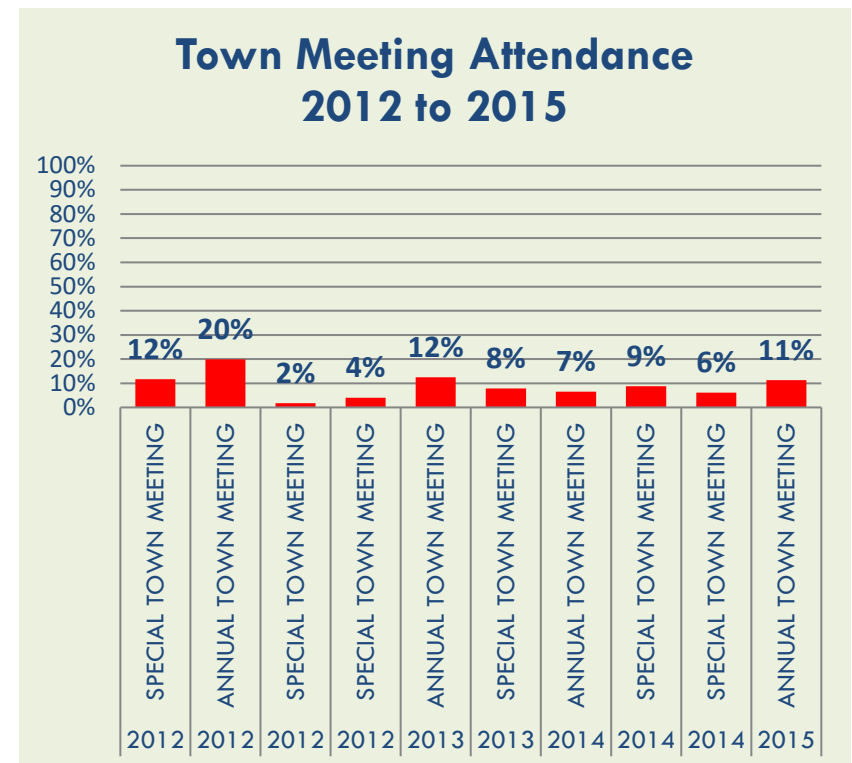
Photo by Michael Dyer

GOAL TWO: Increase participation in Town government

Essex is a great place to live, but keeping it that way will be the work of many residents. Preserving the Town's natural resources, local businesses and good public services is a job for all of us. In recent years however, the Town has seen very low levels of civic participation. Turnout in the last three Town elections averaged only 14% of eligible voters. Only 313 or 12% of Town residents attended our annual Town Meeting on average during that same time span. 122 people serve on the Town's Boards and Commissions, but there is always a need for new members to participate. Town government works best when it reflects the population it serves and is challenged by new or different ideas. Increased participation in the Town's governance, whether by attending our annual Town Meeting or volunteering for a Board and Commission, or even just voting in Town elections, is important to maintaining Essex's quality of life.

To achieve this goal, the Essex SPC recommends the Town take the following actions:

- a) Conduct public awareness activities to inform residents of major government events and ways they can get involved.
- b) Develop an Essex 101 guide to town government.
- c) Inspire participation by considering fun ways to get residents involved
- d) Explore possibility for hosting voter information nights that also serve as community building events.
- e) Town Boards and Commissions should develop outreach plans for engaging residents, recruiting new members and mentoring them
- f) Consider alternatives to existing town voting/elections (e.g. Saturday town meeting, babysitting, pairing with national elections in November).



■ As a percentage of registered voters in the Town of Essex, figures courtesy of the Town Clerk

GOAL THREE: Maintain and develop a strong business community

Essex is home to nearly 150 businesses, providing more than 900 jobs to area residents. Our iconic antique shops and restaurants attract customers from all over New England. Preserving a dynamic local business community, including for home-based businesses, is a key part of maintaining the qualities we like most about Essex. Essex businesses not only contribute to the local economy but also to the Town through the more than \$1M in taxes they supply annually to support vital public services. The local meals tax provides more than \$180K annually, according to the Town Treasurer's statistics. While we can be proud of the entrepreneurs the Town has nurtured for years, ensuring their prosperity for the future requires the Town's constant attention. Identifying appropriate land for potential commercial development and updating zoning to make rules clearer are important to maintaining a strong business community.

To achieve this goal, the Essex SPC recommends the Town take the following actions:

- a) Support business initiatives at the Selectboard level creating a fertile field for new ideas, concepts and ventures
- b) Establish a Zoning Sub-Committee of the Essex Planning Board to look how zoning can support economic development and create new commercial and economic zone(s).
- c) Adopt a Downtown Overlay zoning district to ensure clearer, standard ground rules for development and address the needs of non-conforming lots.
- d) Conduct economic development review to determine appropriate places for new commercial/industrial development and implement a marketing strategy to attract businesses.
- e) Consider whether and how renewable energy generation (i.e. solar siting) can support economic development.
- e) Aid businesses outgrowing home occupations and incubate more local businesses.
- f) Win grants to spur improvements in decorative parking, street lighting and other aesthetic improvements, town land realignment and boardwalk construction.
- g) Sponsor Town events that draw people to Essex businesses.



Photo courtesy of Essex Merchants Group

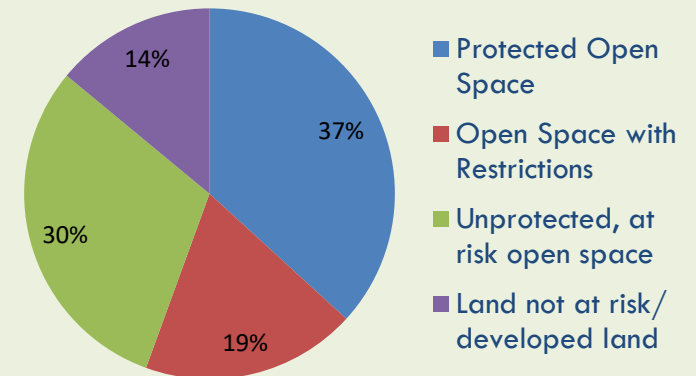
GOAL FOUR: Increase the amount of protected land in Essex

Essex benefits from 3,221 acres of protected land on 199 parcels across Town. This land provides habitat for a variety of wildlife, while also being critical to the health of the Town's defining marshes and rivers. The Town has strong partners in the Manchester-Essex Conservation Trust and the Essex County Greenbelt Association, which work with landowners and communities to conserve fragile ecosystems and valuable scenic view sheds. There are natural reasons which make certain land difficult to develop in Essex, notably the widespread wetlands and ledge. The Town cannot however take for granted that its valued rural qualities will not come under threat. Identifying further land parcels of significant environmental importance for conservation must remain a priority.

To achieve this goal, the Essex SPC recommends the Town take the following actions:

- a) Use future/additional CPA funds to support conservation priorities and leverage additional private resource for land protection.
- b) Identify land parcels of greatest environmental and scenic value for protection.
- c) Develop stronger relationships with local conservation groups, such as Essex County Greenbelt and the Manchester-Essex Community Trust to engage land owners and identify financing for permanent preservation.
- d) Adopt appropriate zoning to protect essential parcels of land – consider a Conservation By-Law.
- e) Develop an inventory of protected lands that can be accessed publicly.
- f) Better understand what contributes to protecting scenic view sheds.

Essex Land Protected Status



Figures courtesy of the Town of Essex

GOAL FIVE: Improve the health of and access to Essex's rivers, marshes and lakes

Essex's waterways – its marshes, rivers and lakes – are its most defining feature and have been since its earliest days. They are not only inviting for their scenic qualities but also provide employment and enjoyment to countless residents and people from across the region. They sustain key local industries, such as clamming businesses and recreational boating and fishing enterprises. But Essex's waterways are under great pressure. Sea-level rise and the increasing intensity of coastal storms are real threats to our way of life. Invasive species, such as phragmites and green crabs, choke the river and threaten access and shell fishing. The river has silted up and needs to be dredged. Runoff pollutes Chebacco Lake, making it unswimmable at certain times. The Town is deeply engaged in a program of state-of-the-art analysis and mitigation planning to address these challenges but if the waterways of Essex are its greatest natural resource, the Town will need to continue working with partners, whether in state government or local residents, to address these challenges and preserve these gifts for the future.

To achieve this goal, the Essex SPC recommends the Town take the following actions:

- a) Develop long-term dredging plans for the Essex River (in concert with the Regional Dredging Committee).
- b) Work with local groups, such as the Great Marsh Coalition and Ipswich River Watershed Association, to determine how best to measure and monitor pollution/runoff levels from various sources and control and reduce invasive species.
- c) Consider guidelines to help Essex residents remove and contain invasive plants, especially phragmites.
- d) Work with the state to pursue measures to reduce green crab populations.
- e) Implement public access improvements to Conomo Point and complete long-term leases to finance improvements.
- f) Review policies used in other communities to regulate water pollution
- g) Work with Hamilton to better manage/enforce rules on Chebacco Lake.
- h) Consider steps to increase shellfish populations (e.g. harvest limits, Sunday closures, reclassifying flats).

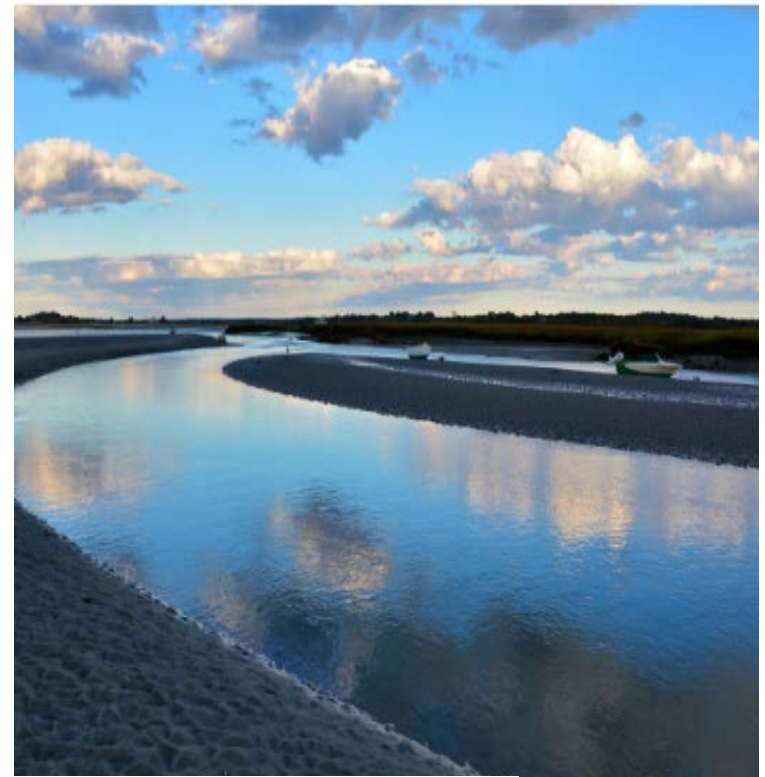


Photo by Michael Dyer

GOAL SIX: Expand the range of recreational opportunities and assets, particularly for young people

Nature has provided Essex with many of its most precious assets, but beyond our rivers, lakes and woods there are recreational and cultural resources requiring our attention. The Town has invested in recreational infrastructure in recent years, including the Downtown's pocket parks. Cultural amenities also provide recreational outlets, such as the Shipbuilding Museum and the historical walking tour of the Town center's Cultural District. The Town has met the recreational needs of residents in terms of space, but further attention should be spent on improving, maintaining and possibly extending available facilities. The Town does not have a Youth Commission and there have been a number of proposals made for improving Memorial Park. Delivering on this goal means exploring these options.

To achieve this goal, the Essex SPC recommends the Town take the following actions:

- a) Use future/additional CPA funds to support recreational priorities.
- b) Examine whether an Essex Youth Commission (EYC) should be reestablished by creating an exploratory committee, which should examine interest and consider whether a part-time director can be hired, and a partnership with Manchester developed.
- c) Assess the current stock of recreational facilities to quantify existing maintenance costs and capacity for additional facility and grounds.
- d) Build maintenance costs for any new or refurbished recreational facilities into capital plan.
- e) Consider Memorial Park improvements, such as feasibility and support for new tennis courts.
- f) Use zoning to preserve recreational resources.



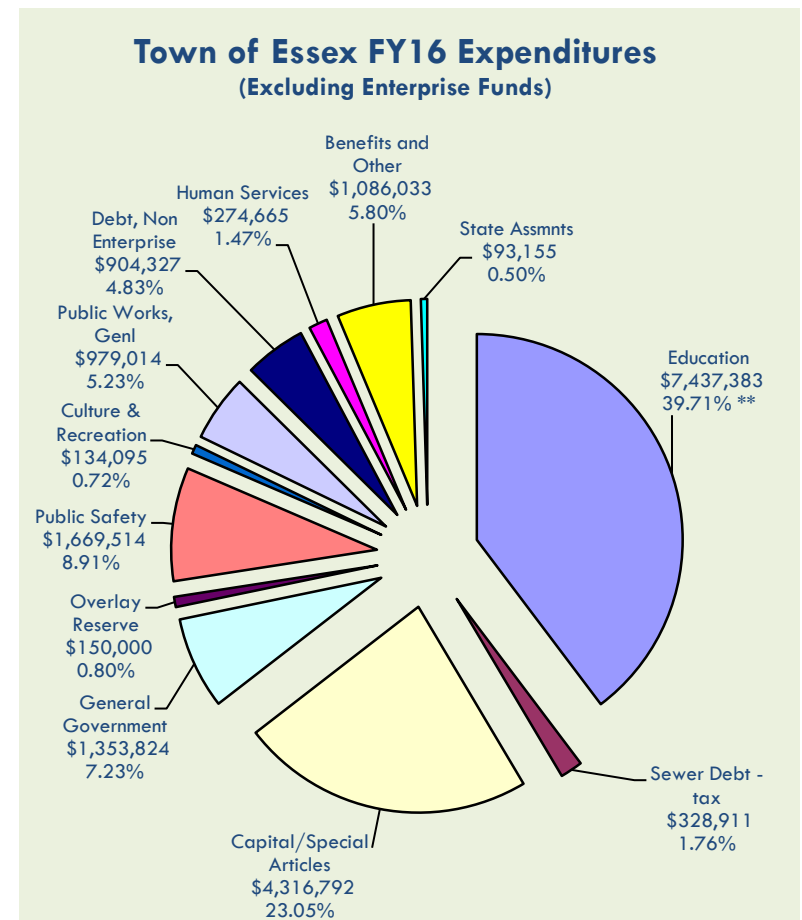
Photo by Arlene Taliadoros

GOAL SEVEN: Develop and deliver a fiscally responsible school budget consistent with multi-year forecasts

The Town of Essex spent approximately 52% of its annual operating budget on education (versus 39% when including capital and special articles as shown below) through the Manchester-Essex Regional School District (MERSD). An informal group of school district and municipal officials from both Towns regularly convenes to consider multi-year school budget projections and anticipate long-term school needs. The aim of this work is to ensure that school spending levels are necessary to ensure academic quality but remain within the budget framework developed by MERSD for the next five years. These efforts must remain a priority for both our academic and fiscal objectives to be met.

To achieve this goal, the Essex SPC recommends the Town take the following actions:

- Monitor budget through an informal group of school district and municipal officials from both Manchester and Essex.
- Maintain multi-year budget forecasts and plans to enable member towns to anticipate school needs.
- Ensure a settled three-year contract with the Manchester-Essex Teachers Association that aligns with multi-year budget projections.



** Education is 39% of the town's FY16 expenditures when factoring in capital funds, figures courtesy of the Town of Essex

GOAL EIGHT: Maintain the viability of the Town's call Fire Service

The Essex Fire Department is comprised of Town residents who volunteer to provide vital fire and emergency medical response services to their fellow residents. 43 on-call firefighters and eight fire officers, including a Chief, two deputies, a captain and four lieutenants serve the Town. Eight of the Department members are emergency medical technicians (EMTs). This structure and staffing level are considered sufficient, and affordable, to meet the Town's needs. The Department has a strong performance record but ensuring it is adequately staffed for the future is a real challenge, and there are areas, such as conducting fire inspections, where new approaches are needed to meet demand. Recruitment and retention of firefighters will require significant commitment to maintain the Department as a viable entity into the future.

To achieve this goal, the Essex SPC recommends the Town take the following actions:

- a) Recruit new volunteer on-call firefighters.
- b) Support the Fire Explorers program to develop future candidates for the fire service.
- c) Consider whether the Department would benefit from full-time leadership in the future.
- d) Ensure all firefighters receive required training.
- e) Examine ways to ensure inspections are carried out in a timely manner.



Photo from Town of Essex Website

GOAL NINE: Meet the housing needs of all Essex residents

Essex is a desirable place to live and its housing prices have risen accordingly. While reflecting the Town's attractiveness, high housing costs can threaten the community's character, making it harder for people from different backgrounds to afford to live in Essex, particularly people employed locally in the trades and service industries for which the Town is known. The Town has only 40 units of means-tested affordable housing and must work to preserve and expand this base. The Town also possesses few mixed-use properties or multi-family dwellings which would contain units amenable to residents looking to downsize into more manageable and affordable homes. One indicator of whether housing in a community is affordable is the portion of households that spend more than 30% of their income on housing. In Essex 23% of households spend more than 30% on housing. An assessment of the housing needs of Essex residents would be a good first step, to be followed by innovative strategies to allow for and produce appropriate housing options in appropriate places.

To achieve this goal, the Essex SPC recommends the Town take the following actions:

- a) Adopt a Mixed-Use Zoning By-Law (2nd floor residential over commercial) to enable better utilization of already developed land.
- b) Allow "in-law" apartments (through zoning change).
- c) Examine affordable housing needs of current Essex residents.
- d) Determine how best to support housing using CPA funds.
- e) Consider partnering with neighboring communities on a joint housing plan
- f) Conduct a market analysis for the Town.
- g) Apply for grant funding for housing studies.
- h) Explore ways to reduce costs for homeowners, including energy cost savings through MassSave free home energy audits.



Photo by Arlene Taliadoros

GOAL TEN: Build Coastal Resilience.

With the predictions for climate change and sea level rise looming large over a coastal community such as Essex, it is essential for the Town to plan for the future now. By all accounts, sea level will increase appreciably over the next few decades and, superimposed upon this “new normal”, more frequent, more severe storm events fueled by climate change threaten the Town’s resources and property with damaging storm surges and wave run-up events.

To achieve this goal, the Essex SPC recommends the Town take the following actions:

Continue to seek and administer grants related to identifying threats, getting closer to mitigation strategies that will provide protection, and implementing suitable projects. Strategies that involve green infrastructure are preferred and will likely be most effective.

Specific avenues should include: a) Continuing research as to whether suitable sand/sediment dredged from the Essex River’s navigable channel may be an effective measure, whether placed just offshore of a barrier beach (sand) or used to build up the marsh platform (silt) to keep pace with seal level rise. b) Continuing to work with the Army Corps of Engineers relative to the prospect of other beneficial reuses of dredged sediment within the Essex River System. c) Continuing research as to whether nature-based solutions, such as mussel reefs, may be useful in hardening the edge of degraded salt marsh banks, in an effort to minimize additional loss of salt marsh area. d) Assessment and renovation of existing seawalls, with initial attention focused on the Conomo Point Seawall System. e) Implementation of other measures that build coastal resilience and that address other aspects of climate change as outlined in the [Town of Essex Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Program Summary of Findings](#).



Photo by Brendhan Zubricki

Annex: Reports by Essex Committees – References

- **Long-Term Planning Committee Report, June 2015**
- **Public Safety Committee Report, June 2015**
- **Conomo Point Plan, Copley Wolff Design Group, April 2015**
- **Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan, updated by Essex Fire Department in 2015**
- **Continuity of Operations Plan, Town of Essex, updated 2015**
- **Town Landing Improvement Plan, Icon Architecture, October 2013**
- **Downtown Boardwalk Feasibility Study, Salem State University, April 2013**
- **Hazard Mitigation Plan, Town of Essex, June 2012**
- **Village Initiative Plan, Long-Term Planning Committee, September 2009**
- **Open Space and Recreation Plan, 2007, currently being updated by Open Space Committee in early 2016**
- **Community Development Strategy, Town of Essex, March 2006**
- **[Coastal Resilience Resources](#)**