



TOWN OF ESSEX STRATEGIC PLAN

2023-2028

REVISED DECEMBER 2022

Photo by Arlene Taliadoros

To the Residents of Essex:

As representatives of Town of Essex Boards and Commissions, along with our at-large members, we submit to you this five-year Strategic Plan for your consideration and feedback. This iteration of the Strategic Plan was developed to help establish the Town's priorities through the year 2028 after the Town's original plan expired in 2020.

Foundations for the Plan

The foundation of the plan is built upon the efforts of the Strategic Planning Committee (SPC), which had crystallized content from a variety of prior Town planning efforts when the original plan was written in 2015. In that sense, this Strategic Plan does not break new ground but presents instead a revised and updated framework for action in the years to come, in recognition of goals that were already accomplished via the original plan.

We submit this Plan to the public because we believe that the goals it establishes, and the actions it suggests that the Town take, will have a positive impact on the lives of all people in Essex. The work to meet plan goals now continues, with the publication of this revised Plan, in draft, for public consultation.

Developing the Plan

This Plan has been developed through a series of public meetings of the SPC. Through these sessions, the SPC has worked to take stock of recent accomplishments and to revise 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 community. 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 Planner, Dana Menon.

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

Joining the discussion about Essex's future

Although the Strategic Planning Committee's plan development and public review processes are now completed, the SPC considers the Plan a living document and we encourage you to provide feedback and input that could possibly be addressed in a future iteration of the Plan. 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. 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 may be provided by sending an email to bzubricki@essexma.org.

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

Sincerely,

Essex Strategic Planning Committee members, including:

John Bediz
At-Large

Tom Barrieau
Conservation Commission

Michael Burke
Conservation Commission

Westley Burnham
Planning Board

Annie Cameron
At-Large

Diane Corrao
At-Large

Dick Denton
Council on Aging

Jodi Harris
Economic Development Committee

Lisa O'Donnell
Planning Board

Ruth Pereen
Chair, Board of Selectmen

Mark Renzi
Finance Committee

Julie Scofield
Open Space Committee

Scott Sheppard
Business Community

Jay Tetzloff
Historical Commission

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 will face in the years to come. The Committee noted the progress the Town had made in recent years: planning for and constructing a new public safety facility; replacing the Conomo Point seawall; working toward an alternate transportation route when the Route 133 causeway floods; assessing the needs of the Town's aging water system (public water supply well improvement work currently underway using the Town's ARPA funding and Water Filtration Plant upgrade design work to soon commence); creating an Economic Development Committee which has developed an Economic Development Plan; working toward the creation of more affordable housing via the formation of the Essex Housing Coalition; creating mixed-used zoning in the downtown area; Town Meeting's acceptance of a bylaw establishing an Affordable Housing Trust; initiating a comprehensive study of the Town's zoning bylaws; and others. 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 (especially in light of the recent COVID-19 crisis); 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 longtime residents; and a civic life that lacks broad participation and does not cultivate enough new leaders.

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

- 1) Update and Finance Critical Town Infrastructure**
- 2) Emergency Services - Maintain the Town's Call Fire Department and Improve the Town's Emergency Response to Vulnerable Populations**
- 3) Maintain and Further Develop a Strong Business Community**
- 4) Ensure the Continued Protection and Management of Conservation Land, Open Space, and Historic Places in Essex; Improve the Health of, and Access to, Water Resources and Protected Lands**
- 5) Expand the Range of Recreational Opportunities and Assets**
- 6) Promote Fiscally-Responsible Government**
- 7) Meet the Housing Needs of all Essex Residents Through Community Housing Initiatives and Regulation of Short-Term Rental Units**

- 8) **Build Coastal Resilience**
- 9) **Maintain the Excellence of our Schools**
- 10) **Review and Update Essex's Current Single District Zoning Bylaw by Preparing and Implementing a Comprehensive Residential and Commercial Zoning Plan**

Between now and 2028, the Strategic Planning Committee, Town Boards and Commissions, and Town employees will be working together to achieve these goals. The remainder of the Strategic Plan describes the rationale behind each goal and lists actions the Town will take to bring them to fruition.

GOAL 1: Update and Finance Critical Town Infrastructure

The Town needs to ensure that our Town facilities and infrastructure meet the needs of residents and businesses for their long-term prosperity. Facilities and infrastructure must also continue to adequately serve Town personnel so that services may be provided in a safe and comprehensive fashion.

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

A. Develop, plan and implement new zoning bylaws to enable intentional growth in Essex.

In order to expand the Town's tax base, and by so doing, continue to support and build out the Town's basic infrastructure and support its future capital improvement, the Town must address the needs described below. Currently, Essex has a static revenue base which cannot maintain existing Town infrastructure nor accommodate the new infrastructure needed to support the Town's future essential needs. In order to provide funding for such capital projects beyond what is available from grant funding sources, Essex needs to expand its tax base chiefly by exploring new zoning options. The Committee has laid out a comprehensive plan for addressing zoning in Goal 10.

B. Update Essex's existing Capital Improvement Plan to focus on providing the financial support needed to implement new and maintain existing capital improvement projects.

The following are some of the known capital improvements needed in Essex over the next 5 years:

- a. Replace Essex's aging water system components (see [Wright-Pierce Water System Master Plan](#)) and maintain Essex's 10-year-old sewer system by financing the following (with State funding assistance):
 - i. Water treatment plant improvements – cost of \$2,630,000, plus design costs (the Town is receiving low-interest loans from the Massachusetts Clean Water Trust and as of June 2022, design work has begun).
 - ii. Water supply well improvements – cost of \$995,000, plus design costs (as of June 2022, design work is also underway for this project, using the Town's ARPA funding).
 - iii. Water distribution system improvements (primarily water main replacements) – cost of \$4,372,200 in the near term and tens of millions over the long term.
 - iv. Sewer system pump stations (primarily the actual pumps) will need upgrading and improvement.
 - v. All of the sewer grinder pumps that are not in gravity-fed segments of the Town's sewer system require replacement. The Board of Public Works has already begun this process and funding has come from the Sewer

Betterment fund surplus developed via the two-percent interest that has been charged on all sewer betterments since their inception. Future funding will come from Wastewater Enterprise Fund free cash.

- b. Replace Folsom Pavilion at Centennial Grove – Town Meeting has appropriated funding for materials and/or labor to complement an effort that professional contractors plan to undertake on a voluntary basis during 2023.
- c. Replacement of the Essex River bridge – this State-funded project is underway and is expected to wrap up in 2023.
- d. Finance additional affordable housing in Essex – the Annual Town Meeting of 2022 established an Affordable Housing Trust, with a step recommended by the Essex Housing Coalition. The Coalition will be assembled for a final meeting in the fall of 2022 in order to pass the baton to the new Trust, which will be responsible for championing the cause thereafter.
- e. Continue to improve facilities for all residents at Conomo Point by supporting the Conomo Point Master Plan – a new park and two new parking areas were completed in 2017. The Town replaced the Conomo Point Seawall in 2022 using grant funding. The green space between the road and the wall will offer a much-improved experience. Please see the [Conomo Point Master Plan](#) for more information.
- f. Study the effectiveness of the Fire Department’s response to service Conomo Point, Robbins Island, and Lufkin Point in the event of a fire or a medical emergency and report their findings and recommendations to the Board of Selectmen, with a Study kick-off in the Spring of 2023.
- g. Study the effectiveness of the Fire, Police, and DPW Departments’ plans to provide emergency services for Essex residents/businesses in the event of a natural disaster that prohibits access via the Causeway or Apple Street to southern and northern Essex and report their findings and recommendations to the Board of Selectmen, with a Study kick-off in the Spring of 2023.

C. Continue to seek opportunities to Regionalize Municipal Services with Cape Ann Cities and Towns.

Essex has been fortunate to leverage existing opportunities for regionalization, including schools, IT, emergency dispatch, and other shared resources and services. The Town of Essex, along with other Cape Ann cities and Towns, must continue to seek opportunities to regionalize municipal services in order to meet taxpayers’ expectations in a financially viable manner. A [comprehensive report](#) concerning what has already been regionalized and prospects for additional work has been assembled by the Collins Center at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Town leaders should prioritize revisiting this report for opportunities to work with other communities to develop services, share resources, and realize cost savings.

D. Develop a detailed school reconstruction plan for the Essex Elementary School (including financing) in partnership with the Manchester Essex Regional School District, for necessary renovations to keep the school’s educational program on par with the Manchester Memorial Elementary School and for replacing the aging Essex elementary school, with an initial feasibility study conducted in 2022:

- a. Consider Essex Elementary School building deficiencies identified in a recent study by Habeeb & Associates that was commissioned by the Manchester-Essex Regional District (MERSD) School Committee.
- b. As soon as 2023, prepare the Statement of Interest for Essex Elementary School with the State School Building Assistance (MSBA) program to access state grant funds to defray the future cost of borrowing for such work.
- c. After thoroughly vetting a proposal for major renovation or outright replacement with the public, move toward securing Essex and Manchester funding votes that anticipate construction as soon as 2027 (or some later date if MSBA funding requires multiple cycles to obtain).

E. Develop a plan for disposal of surplus Town property. “Surplus Property” refers to properties that are not in use and are not under Conservation Restriction. The Board of Selectmen will work with the Economic Development Committee and the Conservation Commission to develop a list of criteria for identifying appropriate parcels.

F. Identify areas for new economic development growth, led by the Essex Economic Development Committee.

G. Evaluate the need to expand sewer capacity; investigate the infrastructure capacity of several key parcels to determine development options; based on findings, investigate scope, options, feasibility, and costs. This action will depend on the ability of the Town to obtain additional sewer capacity from the City of Gloucester. While such a development is unlikely in the near-term, talks have commenced concerning the possible infusion of substantial Federal money to upgrade the Gloucester wastewater treatment plant and make it a regional treatment plant. Regionalization would both reduce the Essex sewer rate and would likely offer additional capacity.

Goal 1: Update and Finance Critical Town Infrastructure		
Action	Project Leader(s)	Phasing
A. Develop, plan and implement new zoning bylaws enabling intentional growth in Essex.	Planning Board	1
B. Update Essex's existing Capital Improvement Plan to focus on providing the financial support needed to implement new and existing capital improvement projects.	Finance Committee	2
C. Continue to seek opportunities to regionalize municipal services with Cape Ann Cities and Towns.	Town Administrator	1-5
D. Develop a detailed school reconstruction plan for the Essex Elementary School.	School Committee	6
E. Develop a plan for disposal of surplus Town property.	Board of Selectmen, Economic Development Committee, Conservation Commission	7
F. Identify areas for new economic development growth led by the Essex Economic Development Committee.	Economic Development Committee	3
G. Evaluate the need to expand sewer capacity; investigate the infrastructure capacity of several key parcels to determine development options; based on findings, investigate scope, options, feasibility, and costs	Town Administrator	5

GOAL 2: Emergency Services - Maintain the Town's Call Fire Department and Improve the Town's Emergency Response to Vulnerable Populations

The Essex Fire Department is comprised of local and area residents who are paid when they work to provide vital fire and emergency medical response services to their fellow residents. About forty on-call firefighters and eight fire officers, including a Chief, two deputies, a captain, and five lieutenants serve the Town. Fifteen 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. Retaining the call department saves the Town approximately \$1,000,000 a year versus moving to full-time, benefitted personnel. The Department has a strong performance record but ensuring it is adequately staffed for the future is a real challenge. Recruitment and retention of firefighters continues to require significant commitment to maintain the Department as a viable call entity into the future.

Expect the Essex Fire Department to be cognizant of local and regional Emergency Planning Committees work, not only comprehensively identifying (a) Town facilities and geographies subject to natural hazards and emergency response procedures to protect and serve when needed, but also (b) helping those Town residents with lifestyle compromises, who are likely disproportionately impacted in time of emergency (natural or otherwise) to self-identify. The Town expects that vulnerable populations will only grow due to an overall aging population and climate change. Both the Committee and the Fire Department acknowledge that lifestyle compromises are indiscriminate with respect to age and whether someone is a full-time or seasonal resident. Through steps outlined below, the Essex Fire Department will continue to work with other departments and collectively design procedures to enhance emergency responses to vulnerable populations.

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

A) Maintain the Town's Call Fire Department and EMTs

- a. Continually seek new call firefighters and EMTs.
- b. Support and maintain the Manchester Essex Junior Firefighters program to develop future candidates for the fire service, beginning as Probationary Firefighters.
- c. Consider alternative strategies to address aging firefighting force, including regionalization, incentive programs, etc.
- d. Study whether the department would benefit from full time leadership and/or full-time firefighters

B) Ensure all firefighters receive required training.

- C) Continue to work collaboratively with Town leadership to develop a long-range capital and equipment update and replacement plan, including regular appropriations into the Town vehicles stabilization fund.
- D) Continue to customize delivery of services to vulnerable populations, both locally and possibly via the Cape Ann Emergency Planning Team on a regional scale, with the close involvement of the Essex Fire Department, Essex Emergency Management Director, Essex Police Department, Essex Board of Health, the Essex Council on Aging, the Medical Reserve Corps, and the Eastern Essex Veteran’s District
 - a. Continue to identify vulnerable populations and develop plans to document needs and address avenues of communication and emergency services required.
 - b. To the extent possible, develop more robust “opt-in” procedures for citizens and caregivers to identify current lifestyle compromises and develop action plans to expand lifestyle compromise awareness.
- E) Create ad-hoc committee to help individuals with life-style compromises self-identify life sustaining needs in time of emergencies thereby enhancing local and regional emergency response procedures.

GOAL 2: Emergency Services - Maintain the Town’s Call Fire Department and Improve Town’s Emergency Response to Vulnerable Populations		
Action	Project Leader(s)	Phasing
A. Maintain the Town’s Call Fire Department	EFD	1-5
B. Ensure all firefighters receive required training	EFD	1-5
C. Continue to work collaboratively with Town leadership to develop a long-range capital and equipment replacement plan, including regular appropriations into the Town vehicles stabilization fund	Finance Committee and EFD	1-5
D. Continue to customize delivery of services to vulnerable populations, both locally and possibly via the Cape Ann Emergency Planning Team on a regional scale, with the close involvement of the Essex Fire Department, Essex Emergency Management Director, Essex Police Department, Essex Board of Health, the Essex Council on Aging, the Medical Reserve Corps, and the Eastern Essex Veteran’s District	EFD, Essex Emergency Planning Team	1-5
E. Create ad-hoc committee to help individuals with life-style compromises register and identify their own life sustaining needs in time of emergencies thereby enhancing local and regional emergency response procedures.	Select Committee	1-5

GOAL 3: Maintain and Further Develop a Strong Business Community

Essex is home to nearly 200 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 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 \$1,000,000 in taxes they supply annually to support vital public services. The local meals tax provides about \$200,000 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 following actions:

- A. Create multi-use commercial districts in Essex that will help to increase and diversify Essex's tax base**
- B. Conduct and document informational sessions with large local employers to learn their location requirements and hire an economic development professional for short-term initiatives to market Essex zoned areas for business development.**
- C. Purchase and install historic street lights, trees/plants, and hanging plants and banners to improve the aesthetic appeal of Essex's causeway, primarily using grants and donations.**
- D. Publish a "Doing Business in Essex" comprehensive guide and revise the Town's website content and navigation to aid new and existing businesses in navigating the permitting process in Essex**
- E. Conduct a study to determine the potential ROI in improving Centennial Grove's water and sewer infrastructure so that the Town can maximize its event rental potential.**
- F. Work to the extent possible with MassDOT to improve pedestrian passage along Route 133 from Water Street to the Gloucester city line.**
- G. Utilize awarded FY23 DHCD MA Downtown Initiative grant funding to create a Placemaking Plan to foster an inviting environment in the downtown area and seek funding and partnerships to implement the recommendations of the Placemaking Plan.**

H. Utilize awarded FY23 EOHE Urban Agenda grant funding to hold an off-season event series, potentially in collaboration with Manchester-by-the-Sea and other area partners.

GOAL 3: Maintain and Further Develop a Strong Business Community		
Action	Project Leader(s)	Phasing
A. To create multi-use commercial districts in Essex that will help to increase and diversify Essex’s tax base	Planning Board assisted by the Town Planner	2
B. Conduct and document informational sessions with large local employers to learn their location requirements and hire an economic development professional for short-term initiatives to market Essex zoned areas for business development	EDC	1-2
C. To purchase and install historic street lights, trees/plants, and hanging plants and banners to improve the aesthetic appeal of Essex’s causeway – primarily via grants and donations.	EDC	1-3
D. Publish a “Doing Business in Essex” comprehensive guide to aid new and existing businesses to navigate the permitting process in Essex.	EDC	1
E. Conduct a study to determine the potential ROI in improving Centennial Grove’s water and sewer infrastructure so that the Town can maximize its event rental potential	EDC	1
F. Work to the extent possible with MassDOT to improve pedestrian passage along Route 133 from Water Street to the Gloucester city line.	Town Administrator BOS	1-2
G. Utilize awarded FY23 DHCD MA Downtown Initiative grant funding to create a Placemaking Plan, and seek funding and partnerships to implement the recommendations of the Placemaking Plan.	Town Planner	1-5
H. Utilize awarded FY23 EOHE Urban Agenda grant funding to hold an off-season event series, potentially in collaboration with Manchester-by-the-Sea and other area partners.	Town Planner	1-5

GOAL 4: Protect and Manage Conservation Land, Open Space, and Historic Places in Essex; Improve the Health of, and Access to, Water Resources and Protected Lands

Essex benefits from over 3,200 acres of protected land on about 200 parcels across Town, with both historic architecture and scenic views that, together, create a unique sense of place. This environment provides wildlife habitat, and is critical to the health of the Town's defining marshes, rivers, and wooded uplands. The natural features that make certain land difficult to develop, notably the widespread wetlands and granite ledges that comprise our most desirable wild spaces, do not fully protect Essex from external development pressures, climate change, or other threats. Consequently, preservation of the Town's most valuable natural and historic resources requires monitoring existing restrictions and identifying further land parcels of significant environmental importance for conservation.

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

A) Preserve and protect our scenic open spaces, forest ecosystems, agricultural heritage, and threatened habitats:

- a. Focus on: wooded uplands, such as Essex Woods; large freshwater wetlands, such as Chebacco Lake; The Great Marsh; and buffer zones surrounding certified vernal pools
- b. Preserve lands under conservation through active management of conservation restrictions, potentially in coordination with conservation organizations that operate within Essex: The Trustees, Essex County Greenbelt, and Manchester Essex Conservation Trust.
- c. Manage the disposition of Town-owned land with a balance of consideration given to both economic and environmental values, using a set of criteria developed jointly by the Conservation Commission, the Economic Development Committee, and the Board of Selectmen.
- d. Explore options for improved wetland and water resource management, including policy integration with neighboring communities that defines and promotes the social, economic, and environmental benefits of wetland resource protection

B) Establish a voluntary, non-binding Local Register of Historic Places to help distinguish properties of greatest historical significance to the Town of Essex and ensure that measures are in place to ensure the integrity and longevity of these properties and spatial arrangements.

- a. Specific mechanisms to be developed in conjunction with Town Historical Commission

C) Establish an Essex Tree Initiative/Friends of Essex Trees to promote and protect existing and future trees on Town-owned land and in otherwise protected areas (e.g., border zones adjacent to wetland resources):

- a. Conduct a Tree Inventory
- b. Explore partnering with Manchester on a shared tree warden
- c. Develop an Essex Tree Policy for the protection of particularly valuable specimens

D) Develop and implement policies that encourage the health of the salt marsh and remediate human-caused damage where it has occurred

- a. Promote, and if necessary, mandate low impact constructions systems, such as the use of helical moorings, helical footings, and height x width restrictions for piers & docks where possible
- b. Study possible relocation of moorings away from clam flats and institute as appropriate
- c. Support existing efforts at marshland remediation (i.e., The Trustees) and investigate/promote expansion of these efforts to additional parcels

E) Under the oversight of the Essex Conservation Commission, develop an Essex Wetlands Bylaw to provide additional enforcement capability to the MA Wetlands Protection Act

- a. Regulate building near water sources and other wetland resources:
 - Enact setbacks from water/marsh resources, including Do-Not-Disturb zones
 - Limit/prohibit septic systems within 200 feet of water/marsh
 - Modify the building code to require rain gardens and storm water runoff management and encourage green roofs for development in the border zones adjacent to wetland resources.
 - Investigate potential sources of contamination that can adversely impact wetland resources within our community.

GOAL 4: Ensure the Continued Protection and Management of Conservation Land, Open Space, and Historic Places in Essex; Improve the Health of, and Access to, Water Resources and Protected Lands		
Action	Project Leader(s)	Phasing
A. Preserve and protect our scenic open spaces, forest ecosystems, agricultural heritage and threatened habitats,	Open Space Committee & Conservation Commission	1-5
B. Establish a voluntary, non-binding Local Register of Historic Places to help distinguish properties of greatest historical significance to the Town of Essex and ensure that measures are in place to ensure the integrity and longevity of these properties and spatial arrangements.	Historical Commission	1-5
C. Establish an Essex Tree Initiative/Friends of Essex Trees to promote and protect existing and future trees on Town-owned land and in otherwise protected areas (e.g., border zones adjacent to wetland resources)	Open Space Committee & Conservation Commission	1-5
D. Develop and implement policies that encourage the health of the salt marsh and remediate human-caused damage where it has occurred	Conservation Commission & Harbor Master	1-5
E. Under the oversight of the Essex Conservation Commission, develop an Essex Wetlands bylaw to provide additional enforcement capability to the MA Wetlands Protection Act.	Conservation Commission	1-5

GOAL FIVE: Expand the Range of Recreational and Enrichment Opportunities and Assets

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, rebuilding and enhancing the baseball field at Shepard Memorial Park, and a current effort to repave the tennis courts. Cultural amenities also provide recreational outlets, such as the Shipbuilding Museum and the historical walking tour of the Town'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. As the Town does not have a Youth Commission but relies on a partnership with the Ipswich YMCA for summer recreational children's programming, we would be wise to leverage this relationship to expand programming to other groups in Town seeking learning and educational opportunities.

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

A. Create ad-hoc committee to identify current opportunities and unmet needs for recreation and enrichment.

- a. Involve Town government and the individuals we serve by identifying outdoor and indoor enrichment and recreational enhancements, suggestions, and new opportunities.
 - i. Develop mechanism to survey Essex residents, including but not limited to Manchester-Essex Little League, Essex Elementary School and PTO, visitors to the Town Library, Camp Dory Parents, Essex COA, Friends of Essex Tennis, Pickle Ball & Bocce, to identify their recreation needs and suggestions.
- b. Identify and create awareness of current local, Town, recreational assets, and organizations, repairable assets, and assets, including "open space," with recreation potential.
 - i. Develop communication processes sharing recreation opportunities and assets lists with community, including but not limited to Centennial Grove, Memorial Park, boat launching facilities, private-public hiking trails, Clammers Beach, and Elementary School Playground.
 - ii. Develop annual Board/Department budgeting process identifying recreation programs and assets, targeting available CPA funding as available.

B. Expand partnership opportunities with the Ipswich YMCA to provide expanded programming.

- a. Partner with the YMCA to organize an ad hoc committee to address identified educational and recreational needs for residents of all ages:
 - i. Leverage Y’s existing service to other towns or municipalities
 - ii. Avail ourselves of existing marketing surveys already conducted by the Y
 - iii. Secure existing locations that can support Y programming and collaborate with the Y on their grant-funded efforts to improve existing TOE infrastructure
 - iv. Gauge interest by doing a test run of several programs that have wide appeal

C. Revisit the Essex Bike Plan (see reference list for link) and develop goals and plans to make biking and walking safer for all. Consider a partnership with the Manchester Bike and Pedestrian Committee.

GOAL FIVE: Expand the Range of Recreational Opportunities and Assets		
Action	Project Leader(s)	Phasing
A. Create ad-hoc committee (AHC) to identify current opportunities and unmet needs for recreation.	Community Service Leaders	1-2
B. Expand partnership opportunities with the Ipswich YMCA to provide expanded programming.	AHC	1-5
C. Revisit the Essex Bike Plan and develop goals and plans to make biking and walking safer for all. Consider a partnership with the Manchester Bike and Pedestrian Committee.	AHC	1-5

GOAL 6: Promote Fiscally Responsible Government

Concerns about the rising impact of inflation and a tight labor market have required a continued cautious stance in our budget planning, despite an increase in the Town's revenues. Town budgets reflect some unexpected planning challenges beyond our control and have offset an otherwise lean approach to managing the Town's finances.

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

- A. Achieve and maintain economic sustainability through prudent decision making, fiscal restraint, and carefully-guided development, while preserving the Town's rural atmosphere and excellent schools.**
- B. Finance critical Town infrastructure for the next 5 years; plan for financing the next 10 years.**
- C. Continue to increase shared services with neighboring communities to reduce the Town's operating costs and improve services (see the 2019 report "[A Review of Regional and Shared Services for the Towns of Essex and Manchester-by-the-Sea](#)").**
- D. Optimize mutual transparency and accountability between the School District and Town leadership in the budget process.**
 - a. Provide more periodic reporting on actual results, versus budgeted results, such as midyear budget reporting
 - b. Provide transparency on operational staffing regarding level services
 - c. Operate the school budget with limited use of reserves
- E. Continue to leverage Federal and State funding for water and sewer improvements and other projects; identify shovel-ready projects to take advantage of available funding.**
- F. Explore alternative sources of revenue for the Town where appropriate, beyond increasing the tax rate and direct financial burden on residents.**
- G. Study impacts of increasing commercial tax rate.**

GOAL 6: Promote Fiscally Responsible Government		
Action	Project Leader(s)	Phasing
A. Achieve and maintain economic sustainability through prudent decision making, fiscal restraint, and carefully guided development while preserving the Town's rural atmosphere and excellent schools.	Board of Selectmen and Finance Committee	3
B. Finance critical Town infrastructure for the next 5 years; plan for financing the next 10 years.	Board of Selectmen and Finance Committee	2
C. Continue to increase shared services with the neighboring communities to reduce the Town's operating costs and improve services.	Board of Selectmen and Finance Committee	4
D. Optimize mutual transparency and accountability between the School District and Town leadership in the budget process.	Board of Selectmen and Finance Committee	Ongoing
E. Continue to leverage Federal and State funding for water and sewer improvements and other projects; identify shovel-ready projects to take advantage of available funding.	Board of Selectmen and Finance Committee	1
F. Explore alternative sources of revenue for the Town where appropriate, beyond increasing the tax rate and direct financial burden on residents.	Economic Development Committee	5
G. Study impacts of increasing commercial tax rate.	Board of Assessors	1-5

GOAL 7: Meet the Housing Needs of All Essex Residents Through Community Housing Initiatives and Regulation of Short-Term Rental Units

Many current and future residents cannot afford to purchase or rent a home in Essex because of the high cost of housing. Affordable housing supports the Town's economic development goals and provides income-accessible homes for workers who may choose to work for local businesses, which often suffer from the lack of available labor.

At the 2022 Annual Town Meeting, voters approved the establishment of an affordable housing trust. Formation of the trust will allow the Town to act swiftly if a community housing opportunity should arise that would meet the need for increasing the Town's affordable housing stock.

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

- A. Develop a housing plan that includes five- and ten-year goals, helping Essex meet its affordable housing goals and plan for its implementation.** The housing plan will be championed by the newly-formed Essex Affordable Housing Trust.
- B. Manage and guide the development of affordable housing for the benefit of current and future residents, and to fulfill the State recommendations, maximizing local initiatives and minimizing any adverse economic and environmental impacts to the Town.** The Essex Housing Coalition, which is a collection of public and private stakeholders interested in increasing the affordable community housing stock in Essex, operated under the auspices of the Citizens' Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA) and grew out of a recommendation in the 2015-2021 Essex Strategic Plan. In 2019 the Coalition conducted demographic analysis and public outreach to lay the foundation for advancing affordable housing in Essex. Post-COVID the Coalition began to focus on increasing the rent-restricted housing stock in Essex beyond the senior housing complex at Chebacco Terrace. The Coalition was also supportive of the downtown mixed-use zoning bylaw which was adopted by Town Meeting in June of 2021. The Coalition was working with property owners who may be willing and able to support rent-restricted units. In the fall of 2022, the Coalition disbanded to make way for the Essex Affordable Housing Trust and the baton will be passed to the Trust in this regard.
- C. Further study the prevalence, regulation, and appropriate taxation of short-term rental units within the Town of Essex.** The Town could eventually derive significant, non-property tax revenue from the short-term rental market, while ensuring that the practice does not disrupt or detract from established neighborhoods.

GOAL 7: Meet the Housing Needs of all Essex Residents Through Community Housing Initiatives and Regulation of Short-Term Rental Units		
Action	Project Leader(s)	Phasing
A. Develop a housing plan that includes five and ten-year goals, helping Essex meet its affordable housing goals and plan for its implementation.	Affordable Housing Trust	2
B. Manage and guide the development of affordable housing for the benefit of current and future residents, and to fulfill the State recommendations, maximizing local initiatives and minimizing any adverse economic and environmental impacts to the Town	Affordable Housing Trust	3
C. Further study the prevalence of, regulation of, and appropriate taxation of short-term rental units \within the Town of Essex.	Board of Selectmen and Town Administrator	1

GOAL 8: Promote Renewable Resources and Build Coastal Resilience

While challenges of all types face the Town with respect to the ever-accelerating pace of climate change, the chief concern is flooding from sea level rise and more frequent/more severe coastal storms with attendant storm surges. As such, many of the proposed action items below are focused on increasing the Town's level of resilience in this area. Perhaps the most important defense against sea level rise and coastal storm surges is a natural asset that the Town has relied upon for centuries - the coastal salt marsh itself. Studies have demonstrated that the marsh platform, if kept intact and allowed to rise with the pace of sea level rise, is an excellent attenuator of both storm currents and wave action. The other action items in this particular goal are focused on what each community in the country and globally should be thinking about with respect to decreasing emissions of greenhouse gasses. Many of the recommended actions will not only save money for the Town from an operational standpoint, the actions will hopefully help to dampen the severity of climate change and sea level rise in the long run, which, in turn, will take pressure off of the extent of coastal resilience that will be necessary. The Town is presently working to establish what its renewable resources and climate change ten-year goal should include.

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

- A) Review past use of renewable resources and foster steps in next five years to reach a ten-year goal.** This responsibility has historically been shouldered by the Town Planner, since the Town Planner manages the Town's participation in the State's Green Communities Grant Program. In order to be certified as a Green Community back in 2015, the Town Planner had to present a plan that would keep the Town moving toward more sustainable practices. While the establishment of a Town committee to help track and foster this effort may be helpful, the Town Planner needs to remain the primary driver with respect to this process.
- B) Phase out fossil-fuel burning municipal vehicles to the extent practicable.** The Town's Green Communities Plan already has targets set for this type of phase out. Since the majority of Town vehicles are public safety-related or are heavy DPW equipment, most of our rolling stock is exempt from a mandate to convert from fossil fuel. Nonetheless, there are opportunities for green vehicles in the future. The Town Planner would track this in the future.
- C) Determine feasibility of installing electric vehicle charging stations at municipal parking spaces. If feasible, seek funding for installation.** EV charging stations are available via grants and such grants have been offered to the Town. However, the Department of Public Works does not presently have the staff capacity to administer the back-office portion of such installations. EV installations involve hand-offs between charges from the electric utility and payments coming in from users. Stations also require regular maintenance and the payment of cellular bills for connectivity. The Department of Public Works would need to embrace this type of project before progress can be made.

- D) Determine feasibility of installing solar panels on municipal buildings. If feasible, seek funding for installation.** Perhaps the best candidate for such an installation would be the new public safety building. However, until the concerns relative to the construction defects associated with the new roof are cleared up, this type of project cannot go forward. The Selectmen and the police and fire departments could consider this project in time.
- E) Ensure successful completion of seawall replacement project.** The Conomo Point seawall replacement project was completed in May, 2022. The Selectmen are turning their attention to the renovation of both of the stone piers that are associated with the seawall using unspent seawall funding (the seawall project came in under budget). The Town Administrator will work toward realizing this new goal using over \$200,000 in available funding.
- F) Work to ensure elevation of Apple Street Roadbed.** The Town has received four State grants so far with respect to designing and permitting roadbed elevation at the Southern Avenue end of Apple Street. The Town is presently using Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) grant funding for completion of design and permitting work, with eventual construction perhaps relying on future Federal funding (90%) and major State grant programs (remaining 10%). If this short section of Apple Street can be elevated out of the coastal storm surge zone, it will provide a reliable alternative transportation route linking the two halves of the Town when the causeway on Route 133 is flooded. The Town Administrator is overseeing this work.
- G) Work to establish or protect eelgrass in all areas where possible or appropriate.** Work in this area has proceeded in the past but storms and illegal shellfish harvesting disturbance has set the work back. Several organizations are currently working to expand establishment. Selectman Peter Phippen (in his professional capacity) and his associates are presently managing this work.
- H) Use dredge spoils for saltmarsh enhancement and protection once allowed by state regulators.** The Town, with the University of New Hampshire, studied (through a State grant program) a natural sediment deposition event that illustrated that sediment can be placed on healthy salt marsh with no detrimental impact. However, State regulators are still not ready to permit this type of project, even as a small pilot. We continue to work with Senator Tarr and others on possible allowances for the future. Using dredge spoils in this way (known as thin layer placement – TLP) would assist with navigation in the Essex River while fortifying the marsh against sea level rise and future storm events. The salt marsh is the Town's primary defense against such events. In the meantime, the Town has learned that Congress has funded the Army Corps of Engineers to conduct full maintenance dredging with traditional means of dredge spoil disposal during the winter of 2023/24. We are hopeful that the Town may be able to employ TLP in future years, in order to possibly eliminate the need for future large-scale traditional maintenance dredging.

- I) Establish mussel reefs to help retain marsh edges.** The Town, with Northeastern University, studied (through a State grant program) the potential use of mussel reefs to stabilize salt marsh banks to arrest horizontal degradation of the marsh. The study found that water temperature may actually be more favorable to oyster reefs but State regulators are not necessarily ready to allow such projects.
- J) Analyze study findings about southerly sediment flows along Crane Beach for practical application.** The Town, with Boston University (studied through a State grant) how sediment from north of Essex (primarily sand) drifts south over time, steadily decreasing beaches to the north and building up shoals in Ipswich and Essex Bays to the south. The final report for that project is pending and it may be used to better understand how future, increased storminess might impact sedimentation in Essex Bay and the Essex River. Sedimentation may cause more navigational problems and projects that use accumulated sand to nourish area beaches might be the solution. Beneficial re-use of sediment may also serve to further protect marsh and shoreline areas.
- K) Assess the viability of salt marsh ditch infilling using dredge spoils from the Essex River.** Like the prospect of placing dredge spoils on the marsh, use of spoils to fill in old mosquito ditches which are no longer functioning in that way could help restore the marsh and keep it more resilient to expected sea level rise and future storms. Several organizations are presently testing how this type of work may be beneficial.
- L) Continue to plan for increases in sea level rise.** As the Town plans new initiatives that involve property in the coastal zone, it will be essential to determine if a truly resilient solution can be employed. If not, the Town should consider not moving forward with a particular item. It is possible that a new Town organization could be formed to oversee sea level rise components of new proposals.
- M) Re-establish Natural Marsh Drainage on Town-Owned Lands.** Most of the Essex salt marsh was extensively ditched in the 1930s as a way of dealing with mosquito problems. The ditches are no longer functioning in that fashion and, with careful study, some may be able to be filled in. Others have become part of the marsh hydrology and may need to remain. New techniques such as runnelling (creation of new, shallow channels on the marsh surface) and minimal surface compaction are tools that will need to be investigated.

GOAL 8: Promote Renewable Resources and Build Coastal Resilience		
Action	Project Leader(s)	Phasing
A. Review past use of renewable resources and foster steps in next five years to reach a ten-year goal.	Town Planner via Green Communities and other programs	1
B. Phase out fossil-fuel burning municipal vehicles to the extent practicable.	Town Planner guiding Department Heads	4
C. Determine feasibility of installing electric vehicle charging stations at municipal parking spaces. If feasible, seek funding for installation.	Town Planner guiding DPW	2
D. Determine feasibility of installing solar panels on municipal buildings. If feasible, seek funding for installation	Town Planner via grants for studies and for installation.	3
E. Ensure successful completion of seawall replacement project.	Town Administrator	1
F. Work to ensure elevation of Apple Street Roadbed.	Town Administrator	2
G. Work to establish or protect eelgrass in all areas where possible or appropriate.	Selectman Phippen and Dr. Alyssa Novak, UNH	3
H. Use dredge spoils for saltmarsh enhancement and protection once allowed by state regulators.	Town Administrator	Ongoing planning years 1-5
I. Establish mussel reefs to help retain marsh edges.	Town Administrator	Ongoing planning years 1-5
J. Analyze study findings about southerly sediment flows along Crane Beach for practical application.	Town Administrator and Dr. Duncan Fitzgerald of BU	4
K. Assess the viability of salt marsh ditch infilling using dredge spoils from the Essex River.	Town Administrator, Selectman Phippen, Army Corps of Engineers	5
L. Continue to plan for Increases in Sea Level rise.	Town Administrator	Ongoing
M. Re-establish Natural Marsh Drainage On Town-Owned Land	Town Administrator, Selectman Phippen	1-5

GOAL NINE: Maintain the Excellence of Our Schools

The Mission of the Manchester Essex Regional School District (MERSD) is to provide a high quality, comprehensive, student-centered educational experience that prepares them for a post-secondary educational or service experience, a career, and life as an engaged member of society.

Essex has a strong reputation for its commitment to high-quality schools. As the District completes the Manchester Memorial Elementary school building, it is time for the District and member Towns to develop a plan to address the aging Essex Elementary School and continue to fund the District's well-respected educational program.

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

A. Support the goals laid out in the 2021 Manchester –Essex Regional School District Strategic Plan

- a. Establish and foster an authentic Pre-K-12 learning environment.
- b. Integrate social emotional learning into all aspects of the school day.
- c. Celebrate and nurture an inclusive and diverse school culture that recognizes the contributions and uniqueness of each learner.
- d. Maintain a sustainable multi-year operational budget and capital improvement plan.

B. Plan for timing and funding of replacement/renovation of Essex Elementary School

C. Maintain a consistent and predictable level of spending growth in the MERSD annual budget. Town of Essex School Committee representatives will collaborate with District leadership and across member Towns to support District spending growth that is consistent, predictable, and as close to the levy limit as possible while maintaining an appropriate level of reserve funds and providing an educational experience consistent with the District's mission. Should a correction or an override be necessary, Town of Essex School Committee representatives will collaborate with District leadership and member Towns to ensure the budget increase aligns both with District goals and Town spending priorities and limitations.

GOAL 9: Maintain the Excellence of Our Schools		
Action	Project Leader(s)	Phasing
A. Support the goals laid out in the 2021 Manchester – Essex Regional School District Strategic Plan	School District & Town Leadership	1-5
B. Plan for timing and funding of replacement/renovation of Essex Elementary School	School District & Town Leadership	1-5
C. Maintain a consistent and predictable level of spending growth in the MERSD annual budget	School District & Town Leadership	1-5

GOAL 10: To Update and Strengthen Essex’s Zoning Bylaw & To Develop and Study Comprehensive Zoning Maps with Use Districts

Essex residents continue to grow increasingly concerned about protecting residential neighborhoods, supporting and developing our business community, and maintaining and expanding critical Town infrastructure, while still ensuring the personal and commercial property rights of taxpayers. These many and major concerns are the driving forces behind the need for Essex to review, update, and revise the Town’s current zoning bylaw and to undertake a study of existing and potential land uses to develop comprehensive zoning maps with “district use zones” (e.g., residential, commercial, industrial, etc.) to help Essex manage its growth going forward.

In both efforts of updating the Bylaw and of studying district maps, the Town should, in a thoughtful way, work to protect and preserve the Town’s rural atmosphere, its open space and its water resources and consider how both stronger bylaws with our current single use district and the adoption of “district use zones” could preserve the Town’s character while balancing the rights of property owners and allowing for smart growth and affordable housing. This effort should consider Bylaw revisions and zoning map studies separately, as well as a combined effort, to ensure maximum flexibility for improvements when proposals are brought to Town Meeting.

In 2021-2022, a Comprehensive Zoning Study was completed. This study consisted of a review and assessment of existing land use patterns and lot sizes that could inform future decisions regarding any proposed amendments to the bylaw, conducted a GIS Analysis of Existing Land Use Patterns, incorporated a Community Outreach Strategy, and completed a zoning diagnostic report with basic recommendations. This work was funded by a State grant (Community Compact Cabinet Grant). The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) undertook this work in conjunction with the Town’s Planning Board and Board of Selectmen.

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

- A) Utilize the baseline analysis and public input collected during the completion of the [2021-2022 MAPC Comprehensive Zoning Diagnostic](#) to develop and assess detailed proposals for actual zoning Bylaw changes, as well as preliminary study maps of potential district zoning options. The work of this objective will be funded by an additional State grant (Community One Stop for Growth Community Planning Grant Program) starting in the fall of 2022. This grant will include additional public outreach and targeted efforts to adequately prepare voters for Town Meeting proposals. MAPC**

has been contracted to assist the Town with this work, including both the Bylaw revisions and the preliminary maps.

- B) Present to the Town of Essex, at its Annual Town Meeting and/or Fall Town Meeting in 2023, the results of a well-studied and vetted proposed Bylaw Revision and Update. If the Action A (above) recommendations on the Bylaw updates are approved before or by the 2023 Fall Town Meeting, the Town will have fulfilled the goal of the two-year change of use moratorium (including its extension in May of 2022) that was instituted in order to allow for this important and transformative process.

- C) Present to the Town of Essex, in public outreach forums, well-studied options for use-based zoning districts. These preliminary zoning maps (two or three options potentially) would serve as the basis for continued public outreach and discussion to work towards an eventual goal of approving a zoning map for the Town with use-based districts at a future Town Meeting.

GOAL 10: Review and Update Essex’s Current Single District Zoning Bylaw		
Action	Project Leader(s)	Phasing
A. Utilize the baseline analysis and public input collected during the course of 2021-2022 Comprehensive Zoning Study to develop and vet detailed proposals for actual zoning bylaw changes.	Planning Board and Board of Selectmen	1
B. Present to the Town of Essex at its Fall Town Meeting in 2023 the results of a well-studied and vetted proposed zoning bylaw recommendations.	Planning Board and Board of Selectmen	2
C. Present to the Town of Essex, in public outreach forums, well-studied options for use-based zoning districts.	Planning Board and Board of Selectmen	2-5

Reports by Essex Committees – References

[Community Development Strategy, Town of Essex, 2006](#)

[Wright-Pierce Water System Master Plan, 2019](#)

[Downtown Boardwalk Feasibility Study, Salem State University, 2013](#)

[Town Landing Improvement Plan, Icon Architecture, 2013](#)

[Conomo Point Plan, Copley Wolff Design Group, 2015](#)

[Continuity of Operations Plan, Town of Essex, updated 2020](#)

[Public Safety Committee Report, 2015](#)

[Long-Term Planning Committee Report, 2015](#)

[Essex Economic Development Plan, 2020](#)

[Manchester-Essex Regional School District Strategic Plan, 2021](#)

[Rapid Recovery Plan for Essex and Manchester-by-the-Sea, 2021](#)

[Finance Committee Capital Improvement Plan, 2021](#)

[Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan, updated 2015](#)

[Hazard Mitigation Plan, Town of Essex, updated 2019](#)

[A Review of Regional and Shared Services for the Towns of Essex and Manchester-by-the-Sea, 2019](#)

[Village Initiative Plan, Long-Term Planning Committee, 2009](#)

[Open Space and Recreation Plan, updated 2021](#)

[2018 Open Space and Recreation Plan Survey - see p179 of 2021 Open Space and Recreation Plan](#)

[Essex Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Program final report](#)

[Coastal Resilience Resources](#)

[Cape Ann Bike Friendly Communities Report, 2021](#)

[Metropolitan Area Planning Organization Report – Bicycle & Pedestrian Improvements, 2007](#)

[Northern Conomo Point Design Presentations & Materials, 2013](#)

[Essex Zoning Diagnostic, 2022](#)

Annex: Progress on Actions from 2015-2020 Strategic Plan

2015-2020 Strategic Plan – Goal 1 Town Infrastructure

- a) **Develop a plan for building/rebuilding the Town’s public safety facility (ies), including the means of financing such improvements.** DONE - *Planned, funded and built new public safety facility on John Wise Ave.*
- b) **Develop a school reconstruction plan with Manchester, including financing, for renovating the Essex elementary school and replacing the Manchester elementary school.** IN PROGRESS - *Contributed to the construction of a new Memorial Elementary School in Manchester. Time horizon for renovation/replacement of Essex Elementary School is within the next 8-10 years.*
- 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.** IN PROGRESS - *Completed study of the needs of the Town water system – wells, plant, and water mains. All aspects of the Town water system will need attention (wells, plant, water mains). The Town is using its ARPA funding to upgrade and modernize its three public water supply wells and will soon be borrowing money using the State Revolving Loan Fund to upgrade and modernize the Water Filtration Plant.*
- d) **Examine opportunities to dispose of surplus Town properties.** IN PROGRESS - *Tried to sell two unbuildable vacant lots at Conomo Point. One sold, the other had no interest. The Economic Development Committee may review other Town-owned properties to make some new recommendations.*

Additional progress in this area:

- *Planned, funded, and completed a comprehensive renovation for Town Hall*
- *All sewer grinder pump systems are presently being updated*
- *Receiving grant funding for 75% of the cost for Conomo Point seawall replacement, Town has put aside funding for other 25%. The project will be completed by the end of May, 2022.*

**2015-2020 Strategic Plan - Goal 2
Increase Participation in Town Government**

- a) **Conduct public awareness activities to inform residents of major government events and ways they can get involved.**
 - *The Town website, two Facebook feeds, local media, the Town Hall sign board, and two, portable police department sign boards are all used to get public messages across, in addition to traditional media.*
- b) **Develop an Essex 101 guide to Town government.**
 - *The first version of this guide is available on the Town website and it will be reviewed for update in the near future.*
- 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. Town Boards and Commissions should develop outreach plans for engaging residents, recruiting new members and mentoring them.**
- e) **Town Boards and Commissions should develop outreach plans for engaging residents, recruiting new members and mentoring them. IN PROGRESS -**
 - *Used a survey to see who had interest in serving on any board or committee and picked up about ten new people.*
 - *Reports and minutes on website, Town Clerk and Police Department on Facebook feeds.*
- f) **Consider alternatives to existing Town voting/elections (e.g. Saturday Town meeting, babysitting, pairing with national elections in November).**
 - a. *A Saturday Town Meeting was considered by the Selectmen and was not favored.*

**2015-2020 Strategic Plan - Goal 3
Maintain and Develop a Strong Business Community**

- a) **Support business initiatives at the Selectboard level creating a fertile field for new ideas, concepts and ventures**
 - a. *The Selectmen have participated in recent business grant programs such as the LRRP and the Regional Pilot Grant. Other grants have been applied for. Town Hall has access to bludot, a system that allows for direct communication with businesses.*
- 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). IN PROGRESS – Zoning study is underway, applying for grants to revise zoning code.**
- c) **Adopt a Downtown Overlay zoning district to ensure clearer, standard ground rules for development and address the needs of non-conforming lots. – IN PROGRESS - Created the Essex Downtown Zoning District to allow mixed-use by right.**
- d) **Conduct economic development review to determine appropriate places for new commercial/industrial development and implement a marketing strategy to attract businesses. IN PROGRESS -**
 - a. *The Economic Development Committee has created Essex's first Economic Development Plan and is presently working to implement the plan.*
- e) **Consider whether and how renewable energy generation (i.e. solar siting) can support economic development.**

- f) **Aid businesses outgrowing home occupations and incubate more local businesses.**
- g) **Win grants to spur improvements in decorative parking, street lighting and other aesthetic improvements, Town land realignment and boardwalk construction.** IN PROGRESS - *Town is applying for grants to fund implementation of recommendations from the Local Rapid Recovery (LRR) Plan, including Placemaking Plan, Wayfinding, Branding, and Downtown Lighting.*
- h) **Sponsor Town events that draw people to Essex businesses.** IN PROGRESS - *Town is applying for grants to fund implementation of recommendations from the LRR Plan, including Off-Season Events*

Additional progress in this area:

- *Formed an Economic Development Committee (EDC)*
- *Created the first Economic Development Plan for the Town*
- *Completed a comprehensive parking study using grant funding*
- *Downtown roadway was restriped to block off unsafe parking, but maximizing the number of legitimate spots*
- *EDC engaged in COVID business recovery planning through the Local Rapid Relief (LRR) technical assistance grant program.*
- *EDC, along with local partners and the Greater Cape Ann Chamber of Commerce engaged in Regional Pilot Project through the Massachusetts Office of Business Development. Includes direct business assistance, online directory, and marketing*

**2015-2020 Strategic Plan - Goal 4
Increase the Amount of Protected Space in Essex**

- a) **Use future/additional CPA funds to support conservation priorities and leverage additional private resource for land protection.** IN PROGRESS – *The Town contributed to the acquisition of the Greenbelt Sagamore Hill property, located in 3 communities, using CPA funding.*
- b) **Identify land parcels of greatest environmental and scenic value for protection.** IN PROGRESS - *Open Space Committee completed an update of the Town Open Space and Recreation Plan*
- 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.** – *the Town is presently exploring partnerships with Greenbelt and MECT with respect to mosquito-borne illness outreach and education.*
- d) **Adopt appropriate zoning to protect essential parcels of land – consider a Conservation Bylaw.** IN PROGRESS – *Zoning Study underway, applying for funding to revise zoning code.*
- e) **Develop an inventory of protected lands that can be accessed publicly.**
- f) **Better understand what contributes to protecting scenic view sheds.**

2015-2020 Strategic Plan - Goal 5

Improve the Health of and Access to Essex's Rivers, Marshes, and Lakes

- a) **Develop long-term dredging plans for the Essex River (in concert with the Regional Dredging Committee).** IN PROGRESS – *Senator Tarr helped to explore the possibility of developing and funding a regional dredging program; worked with ACEC to fund and execute studies on river dredging maintenance options; Worked with Federal legislative delegation to realign the Federal Channel boundaries in the Essex River to avoid existing encroachments; Army Corps of Engineers is presently funded at a level of \$4.4M to conduct full maintenance dredging of the Essex River, likely commencing in 2023. On a parallel track, the Corps is conducting a Section 204 Study that will possibly help to beneficially reuse dredge spoils within the Essex River system.*
- 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.** *The Chebacco Lake Coalition is presently tackling many of these issues within Chebacco Lake and the Alewife Brook that drains the lake. In the near future, headwaters that contribute to the lake system will also be involved.*
- c) **Consider guidelines to help Essex residents remove and contain invasive plants, especially phragmites.** IN PROGRESS – *Selectman Phippen and others have made great progress in controlling phragmites and pepperweed;*
- d) **Work with the state to pursue measures to reduce green crab populations.** IN PROGRESS – *Essex has participated in every round of green crab trapping grant funding, paying local trappers to harvest and dispose of crabs.*
- e) **Implement public access improvements to Conomo Point and complete long-term leases to finance improvements.** IN PROGRESS – *Long-term leases (20 years) at Conomo Point commenced in 2017. These bring in about \$600,000 in non-tax revenue to the Town each year. Conomo Point revenue financed construction of a new waterfront park and parking areas at Conomo Point for all residents. The Town received grant funding for 75% of the cost for Conomo Point seawall replacement, Town has put aside funding for other 25%*
- f) **Review policies used in other communities to regulate water pollution** *the Chebacco Lake Coalition is beginning to look at these issues with Hamilton and Manchester.*
- g) **Work with Hamilton to better manage/enforce rules on Chebacco Lake.** DONE – *Hamilton shares work with Essex in patrolling Chebacco Lake*
- h) **Consider steps to increase shellfish populations (e.g. harvest limits, Sunday closures, reclassifying flats).** IN PROGRESS – *Shellfish Constable has worked with clammers and the Selectmen to modernize harvest rules and to encourage seed clams using nets on the flats.*

2015-2020 Strategic Plan - Goal 6

Expand the Range of Recreational Opportunities and Assets, Particularly for Young People.

- a) **Use future/additional CPA funds to support recreational priorities.** *CPA funds were used to help purchase and protect the Sagamore Hill property, which spans three communities.*
- 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.** *IN PROGRESS – EYC was reinstated, with a paid director. Was not successful, EYC dissolved.*
- c) **Assess the current stock of recreational facilities to quantify existing maintenance costs and capacity for additional facility and grounds.** *IN PROGRESS – Folsom Pavilion at Centennial Grove was demolished, Selectmen would like to see it replaced and the Town Meeting has appropriated funding for volunteers to replace it in the near future.*
- d) **Build maintenance costs for any new or refurbished recreational facilities into capital plan.** *The Town Meeting has set up and has been routinely funding a recreational*
- e) **Consider Memorial Park improvements, such as feasibility and support for new tennis courts.** *DONE – Private funding revitalizing the baseball field and tennis courts at Memorial Park.*
- f) **Use zoning to preserve recreational resources.**

Additional progress in this area:

- *Essex Library has developed many popular programs for children.*
- *Volunteers have sustained the various holiday celebrations in Essex*
- *Town contract with YMCA for Camp Dory was renewed. Camp is very successful, no liability or cost to the Town.*
- *A request for proposals for a Centennial Grove manager to improve the park and rent it out saw no applicants*
- *A request for proposals for the development of a comprehensive plan for Centennial Grove saw no applicants.*

2015-2020 Strategic Plan - Goal 7

Develop and Deliver a Fiscally Responsible School Budget Consistent with Multi-Year Forecasts

- a) **Monitor budget through an informal group of school district and municipal officials from both Manchester and Essex.**
DONE – A collaborative group consisting of Essex, Manchester, and School District officials meets regularly to discuss school budget issues and planning.
- b) **Maintain multi-year budget forecasts and plans to enable member Towns to anticipate school needs.**
- c) **Ensure a settled three-year contract with the Manchester-Essex Teachers Association that aligns with multi-year budget projections.**

Additional progress in this area:

- *New Memorial School in Manchester is complete. School Administration is starting review of options for renovation/replacement of Essex Elementary School.*

2015-2020 Strategic Plan - Goal 8

Maintain the Viability of the Town's Call Fire Service

- a) **Recruit new volunteer on-call firefighters.** IN PROGRESS – *New public safety facility includes a fitness room, an incentive to getting and retaining call firefighters.*
- b) **Support the Fire Explorers program to develop future candidates for the fire service.** IN PROGRESS
- c) **Consider whether the Department would benefit from full-time leadership in the future.** IN PROGRESS – *Public Safety Committee worked with a professional consultant to study the possible need for a full-time Fire Chief, and found it is not necessary at this time.*
- d) **Ensure all firefighters receive required training.** This has consistently been done.
- e) **Examine ways to ensure inspections are carried out in a timely manner.** IN PROGRESS – *Fire Department shifted to assigning part-time firefighters to serve in the station, keeping inspections and other duties timely. A new, on-line permitting system went live in March of 2022 and has served to streamline the process even more.*

**2015-2020 Strategic Plan - Goal 9
Meet the Housing Needs of All Essex Residents**

- a) Adopt a Mixed-Use Zoning Bylaw (2nd floor residential over commercial) to enable better utilization of already developed land.** DONE – *Added a Downtown Zoning District that allows mixed use by-right.*
- b) Allow “in-law” apartments (through zoning change).**
- c) Examine affordable housing needs of current Essex residents.** The Essex Housing Coalition has conducted surveys and has offered public forums on this matter. The Coalition is presently supporting the creation of an Affordable Housing Trust bylaw by the Essex Town Meeting.
- d) Determine how best to support housing using CPA funds.** If an Affordable Housing Trust is created, its primary funding source will likely be CPA.
- e) Consider partnering with neighboring communities on a joint housing plan**
- f) Conduct a market analysis for the Town.** DONE by the Essex Housing Coalition.
- g) Apply for grant funding for housing studies.** The Essex Housing Coalition was formed out of a technical assistance grant from the Citizens’ Housing and Planning Association and CHAPA continues to assist the Town in this area.
- h) Explore ways to reduce costs for homeowners, including energy cost savings through MassSave free home energy audits.**

Additional progress in this area:

- *Held a community housing forum in January 2020, and a community forum on Affordable Housing Trusts in December 2021.*
- *Held a housing summit at which Harborlight Community Partners reviewed the various avenues available to generate more affordable housing.*

**2015-2020 Strategic Plan - Goal 10
Build Coastal Resilience**

- 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.** Boston University has recently concluded a grant-funded study that looked at how sediment travels southward from Plumb Island and how it gets distributed within the Essex River System.
- 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.** IN PROGRESS – *Studying how adding sediment to the marsh (possibly from dredge spoils from the river) may be well tolerated and good for resilience.*
- 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.** IN PROGRESS – *Studied how creating mussel reefs might help retain the edge of the marsh to keep it intact in the future.*
- d) **Assessment and renovation of existing seawalls, with initial attention focused on the Conomo Point Seawall System.** IN PROGRESS - *The Town received grant funding for 75% of the cost for Conomo Point seawall replacement, Town has put aside funding for other 25%. The Seawall replacement will be complete by the end of May, 2022.*
- 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.** IN PROGRESS – *Studied how adding sediment to the marsh (possibly from dredge spoils from the river) may be well tolerated and good for resilience; became a Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness certified community.*

Additional progress in this area:

- *Demonstrated how resilience and disaster planning at the Town and Regional level can also be practiced at a small scale at home.*
- *Updated the Town’s Federal Hazard Mitigation Plan*
- *Worked closely with other partners in the Great Marsh to contribute to the Great Marsh Coastal Adaptation Plan*
- *Utilized two Division of Ecological Restoration (DER) Grants and a grant from the Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management. The idea is to elevate a portion of Apple Street to address flooding on its Southern Avenue end during tidal storm surges when the causeway on Route 133 has already been inundated (which cuts off the only other transportation route connecting both halves of the Town). The Town plans to apply for a Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) grant in the spring of 2022 that will bring the project through final design and permitting. Thereafter, the Town will pursue Federal funding to actually implement the project, likely using the BRIC, RAISE, or HMGP grant program.*



Photo: Arlene Taliadoros