

## **Essex Strategic Plan Quarterly Update – November 2020**

In developing the 2015 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 ten 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.**
- 10) Build Coastal Resilience.**

This report updates progress on each of the goals, as shown below.

**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 recommended the Town take the following actions:**

- Develop a plan for building/rebuilding the Town's public safety facility (ies), including the means of financing such improvements.
  - This goal has been realized and the new building, which will be located at 11 John Wise Avenue, will be completed in March of 2021.
  - The project will be financed with up to \$3M in cash reserves and \$12.5M in borrowing.
- Develop a school reconstruction plan with Manchester, including financing, for renovating the Essex elementary school and replacing the Manchester elementary school.
  - The two Towns voted to fund the replacement of the Manchester Memorial Elementary School in 2018 and the building is expected to open in 2021.
  - The Essex Elementary School is still serviceable and probably will not be renovated or replaced until the 2028-2034 time range. In the meantime, the Town has been utilizing Green Communities grants and National Grid incentives to fully fund lighting and HVAC upgrades in the building.
- 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.
  - The Town has completed a [Master Plan](#) for the future of the Town water system and Town officials will soon determine where to begin renovation and replacement work.
- Examine opportunities to dispose of surplus town properties.

- The Selectmen have begun to tackle this issue and recently sold one property at Conomo Point, with a second Conomo Point property likely to be sold in the future.

## **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 recommended the Town take the following actions:**

- a) Conduct public awareness activities to inform residents of major government events and ways they can get involved.
  - The Town Clerk and the Essex Police Department have improved their Facebook presences and information rapidly makes it to those who are interested in government programs and events. The Town revamped its website in 2017, making it much easier for residents to stay current with happenings, to get information, and to provide feedback.
- b) Develop an Essex 101 guide to town government.
- c) Inspire participation by considering fun ways to get residents involved.
  - The SPC was part of the Grand Reopening Celebration for Town Hall in 2017.
- d) Explore possibility for hosting voter information nights that also serve as community building events.
  - The Essex Lions Club has generally offered this type of event.
- e) Town Boards and Commissions should develop outreach plans for engaging residents, recruiting new members and mentoring them
  - The Town conducted a survey to understand the interests of new people who were desirous of getting involved in Town government. Respondents to that survey were tapped for many vacant seats on various boards and committees and many are still serving today. There were several rounds of this survey over the years and could be an annual survey.
- f) Consider alternatives to existing town voting/elections (e.g. Saturday town meeting, babysitting, pairing with national elections in November).
  - Preliminary feedback from Town officials and from residents suggests that Essex voters prefer to keep Town Meetings on Monday nights.

### **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 recommended the Town take the following actions:**

- a) Support business initiatives at the Selectboard level creating a fertile field for new ideas, concepts and ventures
  - The Board of Selectmen convened a new Economic Development Committee and supported a grant opportunity to assist the Committee with the production of an Economic Development Plan. The plan was finalized and released in October 2020.
- 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.
  - The Essex Planning Board developed a downtown mixed-use district zoning bylaw proposal that features mixed-use by right and a relaxation of the normal lot area, frontage, and setback rules. The by-law proposal failed at Annual Town meeting in 2020. However, the Planning Board has a good understanding why it failed and are hopeful it will pass at next Annual Town Meeting in 2021. The goal is to allow the area that is already most densely developed to encourage new businesses and new housing via sensible zoning changes.
- d) Conduct economic development review to determine appropriate places for new commercial/industrial development and implement a marketing strategy to attract businesses.
  - These activities were part of the Economic Development Plan effort mentioned above.
- e) Consider whether and how renewable energy generation (i.e. solar siting) can support economic development.
  - The Town is waiting to see if it can subscribe to an upcoming Alternative On-Bill Energy Credit (AOBC) project that allow support for renewable energy at some out-of-Town location while lowering the Town's monthly electricity costs.
- f) Aid businesses outgrowing home occupations and incubate more local businesses.

- These activities are being handled as part of the Economic Development Plan effort mentioned above.

g) Win grants to spur improvements in decorative parking, street lighting and other aesthetic improvements, town land realignment and boardwalk construction.

- The Town purchased all public street lights from National Grid and has converted them all to LED lamps. The conversion process was funded entirely with grant funds. The Board of Selectmen continues to consider the best solution for pedestrian lighting along the Essex causeway, using conduits and wiring boxes installed beneath the new sidewalk when the Route 133 Reconstruction Project came through, a number of years back. Grant funding with respect to parking in the downtown area offered a comprehensive set of recommendations that the Town is considering. So far, the Town decided to install pavement markings and signage in downtown areas where it was not safe to park. A downtown boardwalk along the Essex River, a concept studied using a Seaport Economic Council grant in the past, is not something that the Town is presently planning to implement. The Town has improved public waterfront access and aesthetics at Conomo Point with the construction of two, new resident parking areas and a waterfront park with ramp and float. The Town has applied for over \$1.6M in grant funding for the replacement of the Conomo Point Seawall System. That application was not funded. However, the Town will re-apply during the next funding round.

h) Sponsor Town events that draw people to Essex businesses.

- Normally, prior to the onset of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, the Town comes alongside our business and civic communities by supporting annual events like ClamFest and Essex RiverDay. The Town directly draws visitors with events like the Essex Police Department car show and Santa's arrival at the Essex Town Landing. Certainly, the Town's bicentennial year (2019) brought many visitors, many of whom we will likely see again. Further, when funds have been available, the Town has funded a Town Events Fund that helps with ancillary logistics for events put on by the Town and others and a line item for the promotion of the Town's resources and attractions (which a professional trade organization uses to draw people here).

## **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 recommended the Town take the following actions:**

- a) Use future/additional CPA funds to support conservation priorities and leverage additional private resource for land protection.
  - Using CPA funding, the Town partnered in 2018 with the Essex County Greenbelt, the towns of Hamilton and Ipswich, and others, to acquire a large tract of land known as Sagamore Hill. Greenbelt manages this recreational trail area, which is permanently protected as open space.
- b) Identify land parcels of greatest environmental and scenic value for protection.
  - In 2016, the Essex Open Space Committee completed an update of the [Town's Open Space and Recreation Plan](#) which served this purpose.
- 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.
  - See item a, above, for the most recent example of this type of collaboration.
- 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.

## **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 recommended the Town take the following actions:**

- a) Develop long-term dredging plans for the Essex River (in concert with the Regional Dredging Committee).
  - The Town has proceeded on two tracks in this regard. First, the Town has worked with the Army Corps of Engineers to conduct all of the necessary pre-requisite bathymetry, sampling, testing, and permitting for maintenance dredging of the Federal channel of the Essex River. This process is almost complete and the Town will then wait for the possibility of Federal funding for the work. The Town has also worked with the Army Corps of Engineers to study the potential beneficial re-use of sand and sediment that is clogging the Federal channel. Beneficial re-use includes activities like beach re-nourishment (sand), mosquito ditch remediation, marsh bank stabilization, and thin-layer deposition (organic material). The Town hosts all meetings of the Northeast Coastal Coalition, which is a group organized by Senator Tarr to primarily work toward regional dredging funding and solutions. The Town is presently wrapping up a study with Boston University which will help us to better understand how sediment travels into and throughout Essex Bay.
- 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.

- The Town has several times running received grants from the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries to allow local trappers to harvest green crabs for use as bait or compost, which takes thousands of pounds of green crabs out of the environment each year.
- e) Implement public access improvements to Conomo Point and complete long-term leases to finance improvements.
- The Town has constructed two, new, resident-only parking lots and a waterfront park with a ramp and float. The Town plans to reapply for over \$1.6M in State funding to replace the Conomo Point Seawall System. Long-term leases for all properties in the northern section of Conomo Point have been finalized and are presently yielding about \$500,000 per year. 17 years remain on these 20-year leases.
- f) Review policies used in other communities to regulate water pollution.
- g) Work with Hamilton to better manage/enforce rules on Chebacco Lake.
- The towns of Essex and Hamilton now jointly patrol the lake, whereas only Essex had a boat and regular patrols in the past.
- h) Consider steps to increase shellfish populations (e.g. harvest limits, Sunday closures, reclassifying flats).
- The Town has instituted a permanent Sunday closure for commercial shellfish harvesting. As noted above, the Town has also used the green crab trapping grant program to reduce predation on clams.



## **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 recommended the Town take the following actions:**

- a) Use future/additional CPA funds to support recreational priorities.
  - The Town used CPA funds to help purchase and restrict the Sagamore Hill recreational trail area in 2017. Partners included the Town of Ipswich, the Town of Hamilton, and the Essex County Greenbelt.
- 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.
  - The Essex Youth Commission was re-established in 2017 and has a half-time director and strong group of members. The Commission is presently looking to develop even more programming for the youth of Essex.
- c) Assess the current stock of recreational facilities to quantify existing maintenance costs and capacity for additional facility and grounds.
  - The Essex Open Space Committee has completed this exercise as part of its 2016 [Open Space and Recreation Plan update](#).
- 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.
  - A private "friends" group has received permission to undertake major improvements to the Memorial Park baseball field, including grandstands and dugouts.
- f) Use zoning to preserve recreational resources.

## **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 recommended the Town take the following actions:**

- a) Monitor budget through an informal group of school district and municipal officials from both Manchester and Essex.
  - This group has consistently met to review issues of common import to the three entities (Essex, Manchester, and the Regional School District). The group was instrumental in working toward successful votes for the new Manchester Memorial School and has carefully reviewed school budgets each year to arrive at affordable costs for excellent educational performance.
- b) Maintain multi-year budget forecasts and plans to enable member towns to anticipate school needs.
  - The group discussed above delved deeply into the forecasting process in 2018 and produced a reasonable plan for future school district capital improvements in full recognition of other capital priorities in each of the two towns.
- c) Ensure a settled three-year contract with the Manchester-Essex Teachers Association that aligns with multi-year budget projections.
  - This ongoing strategy has been unfolding smoothly at the hands of the collaborative group and has kept school district operating costs in step with the changing operating needs and priorities of the two towns.

## **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 recommended the Town take the following actions:**

- a) Recruit new volunteer on-call firefighters.
  - An ongoing effort of the Fire Department...
- b) Support the Fire Explorers program to develop future candidates for the fire service.
  - A Manchester Essex Fire Explorers Group has been formed and continues to recruit and develop interested young people.
- c) Consider whether the Department would benefit from full-time leadership in the future.
  - This question was comprehensively studied by the Essex Public Safety Committee and its consultants. The [Committee's final report](#) did not recommend a need for full-time leadership at this point in time.
- d) Ensure all firefighters receive required training.
  - Facing the new State requirement that municipalities must now adhere to Federal OSHA standards, the Town appointed an official OSHA Coordinator who is assisting with training recordkeeping, grant-writing, and renewal. This new requirement will serve to keep Fire Department training and re-training in the forefront.
- e) Examine ways to ensure inspections are carried out in a timely manner.

## **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 recommended the Town take the following actions:**

- Adopt a Mixed-Use Zoning By-Law (2<sup>nd</sup> floor residential over commercial) to enable better utilization of already developed land.
  - The Essex Planning Board developed a downtown mixed-use district zoning bylaw proposal that features mixed-use by right and a relaxation of the normal lot area, frontage, and setback rules. The by-law proposal failed at Annual Town meeting in 2020. However, the Planning Board has a good understanding why it failed and are hopeful it will pass at next Annual Town Meeting in 2021. The goal is to allow the area that is already most densely developed to encourage new businesses and new housing via sensible zoning changes.
- Allow “in-law” apartments (through zoning change).
- Examine affordable housing needs of current Essex residents.
  - Grant funding from the Citizens' Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA) has helped to pull together an advocacy group known as the Essex Housing Coalition. The Coalition conducted a community open house to raise awareness and offer facts and background related to affordable/community housing in January 2020.
- Determine how best to support housing using CPA funds.
  - The Strategic Planning Committee hosted a roundtable with Harborlight Community Partners as the featured guest. Members of the Essex Housing Authority were also in attendance. CPA funding was considered as a contribution toward a multi-family dwelling that was on the market. The former owner of the dwelling chose to simply list the dwelling commercially since the

process for getting partners involved with respect to certified “affordable” housing was too involved for them at the time. Other opportunities may arise in the future.

- Consider partnering with neighboring communities on a joint housing plan
  - A recent municipal collaboration study between Essex and Manchester broadly framed this issue, including examples that are in place in other areas of the State. This initial effort may be able to support more planning in the future.
- Conduct a market analysis for the Town.
  - The Essex Economic Development Committee is presently undertaking this type of analysis.
- Apply for grant funding for housing studies.
  - The CHAPA funding discussed above was the result of a grant application aimed at moving toward this goal.
- Explore ways to reduce costs for homeowners, including energy cost savings through MassSave free home energy audits.

## **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 recommended 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 sea 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](#).

- The Town was heavily involved in the Super Storm Sandy Planning Grant that was coordinated by the National Wildlife Federation several years ago.
- The Town sought and received grant funding from the Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management’s Coastal Resilience Grant Program, which drew on some of the data developed by the Sandy Grant. The project raised public awareness about sea level rise and climate change from the perspective of our first responders.
- The Town sought and received three, separate Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Grants in the 2018-2019 timeframe. Two projects focused on how the marsh platform could be stabilized, both vertically and horizontally. The third project is ongoing and will provide tremendous understanding regarding how sediment moves into and throughout Essex Bay.
- The Town has designed improvements to the Conomo Point seawall system and has applied once for construction grant funding. The Town plans to apply again for funding.

- As discussed above, the Town is advancing on two fronts with the Army Corps of engineers with respect to dredging and beneficial re-use of sediment.
- The Town has received two grants, is waiting to hear about a third, and will apply for a fourth with respect to raising the roadbed elevation on a small stretch of Apple Street to keep it up out of the coastal flood surge that often closes Route 133. This will allow Apple Street to be used as an important alternate route connecting the two halves of the Town during flooding events.