



ESSEX  
FREE  
LIBRARY

YOUR ROAD TO DISCOVERY, ENRICHMENT, & COMMUNITY

# Essex Free Library

## Strategic Plan 2020-2025

Approved: December 2019

## Introduction

Since their establishment in the early 17th century, libraries have been considered a quintessential part of how Americans learn and engage with their local communities. They are places for social interaction, a discussion of ideas and access to free information. If we define a library as part of a social infrastructure that shapes the way that people interact, then in the words of Eric Kleinberg, the library is “among the most critical forms of social infrastructure we have.”

But the library of yesterday is not the same one in operation today. Libraries all over the country are facing significant challenges with overwhelming demands that include space, funding, increasing divergent user ship, and technology. Initially designed to house printed material collections, today’s libraries are being required to redefine themselves in the digital era of books, online access to information, job support and working space for those seeking employment, being an information resource for New Americans with language training programs and community information, and a place for all community members to interact.

Such are the challenges confronting the Essex Free Library. Established in 1803 by the Essex Congregationalist Society, the EFL has evolved from a small meeting house to its present facility. Funded by the Town of Essex, the EFL has a total of 4.8 staff including a full-time Library Director. Currently, the Library circulates over 35,000 items to over 4,000 patrons per year.

The past year has presented many challenges for the Board and Staff. In response, the Board announced the formation of a committee dedicated to the drafting of a strategic plan. The objective of this plan is to outline the strategy over the next five years to meet the ever increasing needs of our community.

## History

The history of the Essex Free Library is one of fortitude and perseverance. The original Essex Free Library (EFL) was established in 1808 by the Essex Congregationalist Society. Based on the principle that “public libraries are of the greatest benefit, as it enables all concerned to acquire literary knowledge and thereby become better citizens and more useful members of society,” it was housed in a wooden church meeting house on the site where the current Library resides. The Library remained at this location until 1838 when fire destroyed it. Not to be deterred, the ECS then reestablished the Library in a new location in the side room of the Town Hall.

For several years, much debate ensued over the need for a larger facility for the Library. The women of the Essex Outlook Club were in agreement and sought a means for funding this

venture. In 1931, a subscription contest was announced in the *Burlington Daily News* and with that a fundraising scheme was drafted by the women. The prize - a Packard automobile - would be awarded to the individual who secured the highest number of subscriptions. At the behest of Mrs. R.E. Mayo, the women identified the golden opportunity to acquire the car and then sell it for the necessary funds to support their library venture. They won the car and with that money and a number of private donations, the Library was reestablished in the Town Green where the Public Works Department now stands. The women supported the operation of the Library for several years at a cost of \$50 annum. But given the resources needed to continually meet this commitment by a small group, the women approached the Town in 1936 to assume financial responsibility for the Library.

The Library remained in this location until 1986 when the Town began to search for a use for the brick church building across the road from the Town Green. The following year, the Town approved funding to convert the Church complex to a library facility. Thus, the Essex Free Library had a new location and remains there to this day.

## Strategic Planning Process and Results

2018 was a year of significant change and challenge for the Board and Staff of the EFL. Changes at the Town management level, discussion of merging various entities between the Town of Essex and The Village of Essex Junction, the unfortunate death of the Library Director and a crumbling building structure brought into focus the need for a Strategic Plan for the Library. To that end, the Board established a Working Group to prepare a plan for discussion and implementation over the next five years.

The first order of business for the committee was to collect and analyze information from the community regarding the type of services and programs the Library should or should not provide. A survey was drafted and administered at the Town Meeting in February, in person at the Library, and online. A total of 352 responses were received - 154 in person and 198 online.

The results of the survey indicated the following:

1. The overwhelming majority of respondents hold library cards (90.2%). Those who do not indicated that they either obtained their reading material online (9.5%) or that they preferred to purchase their own (6.85%). The other main reason for not holding a card was that the Library location was not ideal (6.85%).
2. Respondents indicated that they were well aware of the range of services provided by the Library with the exception of free language learning programs and free online credit courses.

3. When asked what services or programs they would like to see at the Library, respondents indicated the following:
  - a. More dedicated programming for children, teenagers and seniors
  - b. Guest speakers to include local and state representatives, “Meet the author” programs, panel discussions with career experts
  - c. Increasing the lending library collection of eBooks and magazines, books on CD, and improvements to the interlibrary loan program.
  - d. More book clubs for teenagers and adults
  - e. Information for New Americans regarding services and programs in the community
4. When asked how the Library could better advertise the programs and services offered, respondents indicated the following:
  - a. Have a greater presence on social media: Facebook, Front Porch Forum, Instagram
  - b. Utilize the Sign Board outside the Library more
  - c. Interact with the School PTO
  - d. Improve the Library website
5. When asked what the community needs, respondents overwhelmingly indicated the need for a common community gathering place to discuss ideas, meet lawmakers, authors, and other members of the community.
6. The majority of respondents indicated that they would be interested in library programs held on weekday evenings (35.5%) followed by programs in the weekday afternoon.
7. Respondents were asked about their program interests. The majority were most interested in taking classes (54%), learning a new language (45.5%), meeting other people and sharing experiences through discussion groups, book clubs and travel groups (44.2%), volunteering or participating in community projects (42.4%).
8. Of the topics identified by respondents when asked, issues regarding local history (43.8%), home improvement (40.5%), cooking/dining (47.9%), gardening (46%), author talks (44.2%) and travel discussions (45.7%) topped the list.

## Opportunity/Service Points

The Strategic Planning Working group met to categorize the Opportunity/Service points to guide it over the next five years. These points are:

1. Community Connection
  - a. Develop the Library as a safe and socially comfortable place for all members of the community.
  - a. Host 3 to 4 events per year of interest to the community. These could include but are not exclusive to visiting and local authors, State and local representatives, speakers, special medical topics, etc.

- b. Encourage volunteers through the revitalization of the Friends of the EFL.
  - c. Establish a community liaison group to assist in developing community programs.
  - d. Collaborate with Memorial Hall and other facilities to expand space for our programs.
  - e. Improve the handicap entrance to make it more welcoming.
  - f. Develop a building maintenance program to insure our patrons of a safe and comfortable space.
- B. Education
- a. Establish a clearly defined resource center on accessing public services particularly for New Americans and new local residents.
  - b. Improve our technological resources to best meet the future needs of our patrons.
  - c. Work collaboratively with schools to develop programs.
- C. Identity
- a. Enhance our identity in the community by establishing a logo that is easily recognized.
  - b. Establish an independent website that is responsive and timely to communicate with the larger community.
  - c. Develop signage that is visible and informative.
  - d. Continue to improve our presence on social media.
  - e. Develop a Mission Statement that reflects the future of the Library.

Once reviewed and accepted by the Board, the next action is to produce an Action Plan for the next five years.

## Strategic Working Group members

Bonnie Doble, Chair, Essex Free Library Board  
 Janet Watts, Treasurer, Essex Free Library  
 Marie Froeschl, Vice Chair, Essex Free Library Board  
 Caitlin Corless, Library Director  
 Lorna Swerhone, Essex Library Trustee

## Reference:

Kleinberg, Eric. 2018. *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*. New York: Crown. p 32.