



ESSEX TOWN CENTER **MASTER PLAN**



March 2021



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the crossroads of Chittenden County, Essex has been a dynamic engine of prosperity and connectedness for over one hundred and fifty years. In the last thirty years, the Essex Town Center (“ETC”), located at the intersection of Vermont Routes 15 & 289, has been a critical part of the Town of Essex’s development. This document builds on a previous plan and a robust public process to define a vision for an ETC that is **better connected and more cohesive**. We call the plan associated with the vision “ETC Next” (“the Plan”).

This document considers how density, form, land use and character can work together to establish a cohesive sense of place with thoughtful and functional public areas: **an ETC that emphasizes the human experience**. It encourages walkability, promotes a greater mix of uses and works to create a variety of scales of open spaces that provide meaningful value to people.

For this reason, the document is structured around three critical goals that drove the planning process:

1. Better understand the influences and document the pattern of existing development within the ETC.
2. Establish a new vision for the ETC that considers what works today, the type and location of new development that should occur, and how existing land uses might transform and evolve.
3. Determine a set of regulatory and policy tools the Town can address to nurture and support the vision.

The chapters in this document are aligned with the three critical goals stated above.

Chapter 1 -- The ETC Evolves lays the foundation, describing the history and current condition of various community attributes: architecture, recreation, transportation, infrastructure, and environment.

Chapter 2 – Crafting a Vision details the public engagement process for this plan, input that informed the overall vision for the ETC. It also describes characteristics of the various neighborhoods and their optimal development.

The next three chapters offer definitions and specificity to flesh out the vision:

Chapter 3 – Mobility and Connectivity focuses on pedestrian mobility and identifies key locations within the ETC that could be better served by pedestrian-friendly infrastructure.

Chapter 4 – Recreation and Open Space describes functional open space, and how it may be developed to best serve the needs of the community.

Chapter 5 – Establishing an Identity defines an approach to signage and wayfinding that both complements and reinforces the identity of the ETC.

And, finally:

Chapter 6 – Next Steps outlines recommended next steps and useful strategies that will assist the Town of Essex in transitioning from idea to implementation.

How ETC Next Differs from Previous Plans

Unlike the original 1991 Master Plan, this plan recognizes that the ETC is not one place. The area's history and past development trends have resulted in neighborhoods that have unique opportunities and challenges. This plan embraces those realities and offers up new perspectives to assure that each neighborhood has its own use and purpose, but they are connected by pedestrian-friendly transportation corridors, consistent building forms and a consistent wayfinding strategy. Key to this vision are the distinctive neighborhoods within the ETC that create the fabric of the community, which are:

- Butlers Corners
- Historic Center
- VT Route 15 Corridor
- Lang Farm
- Golden Triangle

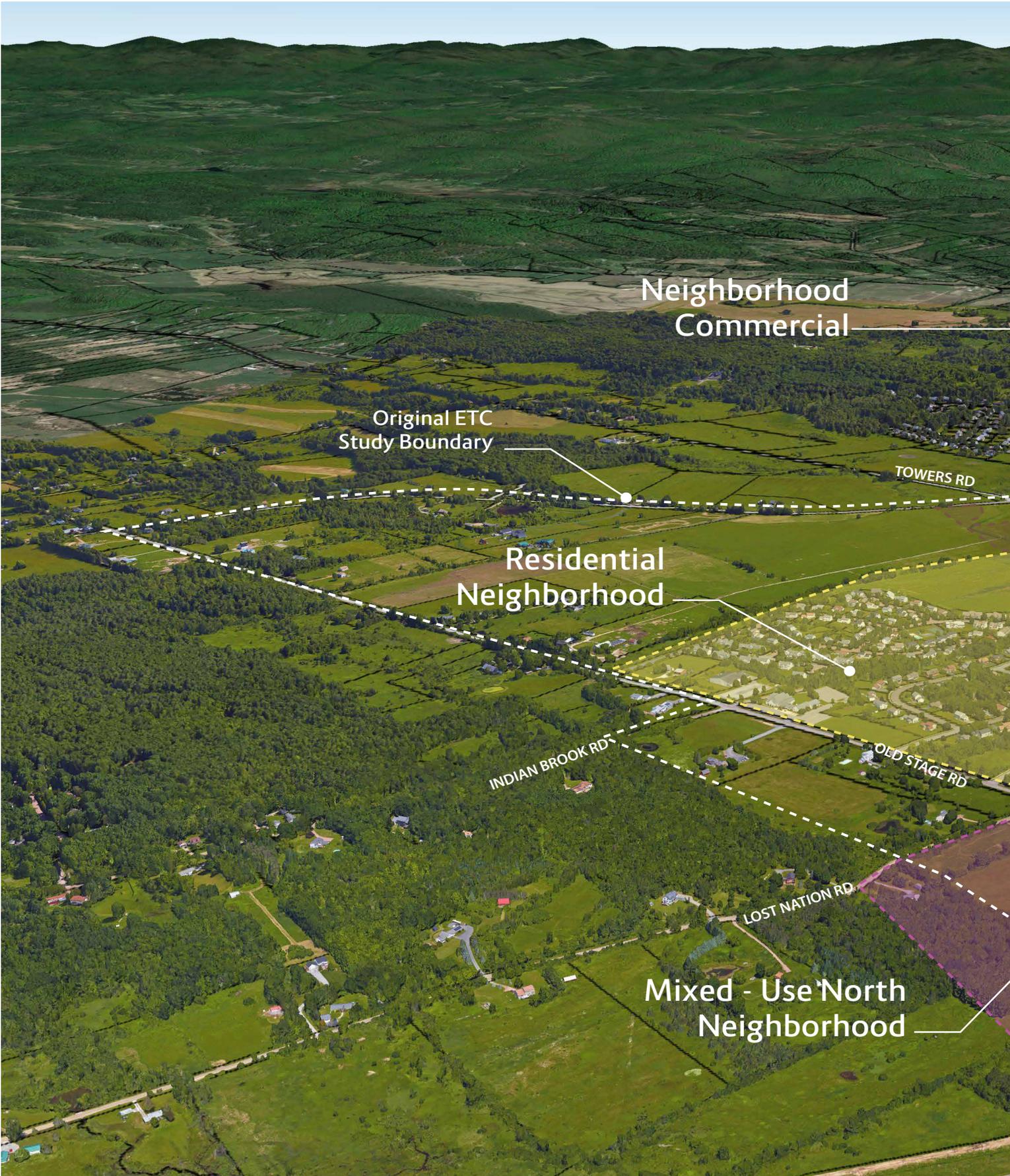
This plan also acknowledges the challenges of reaching the vision. There will have to be hard discussions on critical infrastructure, the balance between public and private investments and how to elevate the quality and character of place. This document serves as a guide to assure the ideas and strategies that form the basis for the vision are kept at the forefront.

Key Elements of the Vision

As described more fully in the document, key elements to fulfilling the vision for the ETC include:

- **Increasing residential density:** The vision recognizes that people make places. Increasing residential density in the ETC can help provide a critical mass that supports existing and future businesses, enhances opportunities for transit and discourages growth in more rural and sensitive areas.
- **Expanding uses:** The vision strives for a more diverse ETC. Allowing more mixed-uses within parts of the ETC can help expand what is possible and give the Town and private developers more options to address changing market needs and demands.
- **Defining and supporting the character for each neighborhood:** The vision establishes general parameters about connectivity, open space, uses and character that inform a separate Design Report for the ETC and, ultimately, future zoning.
- **Understanding the road ahead:** The vision underscores the hard work ahead in establishing the right infrastructure, policies and regulations that are needed to help the vision become reality.

The vision expressed in this document is a guide for the next iteration of the ETC. Its capacity to shape that future rests firmly in its establishment of core objectives for the overall ETC and each of its neighborhoods.



Neighborhood
Commercial

Original ETC
Study Boundary

Residential
Neighborhood

Mixed - Use North
Neighborhood

TOWERS RD

INDIAN BROOK RD

OLD STAGE RD

LOST NATION RD

NEIGHBORHOODS OF THE ETC



Mount Mansfield

Historic Center Neighborhood

Conservation/ Recreation Neighborhood

Mixed - Use South Neighborhood

BROWNS RIVER RD

JERICO RD

Price Chopper

CENTER RD

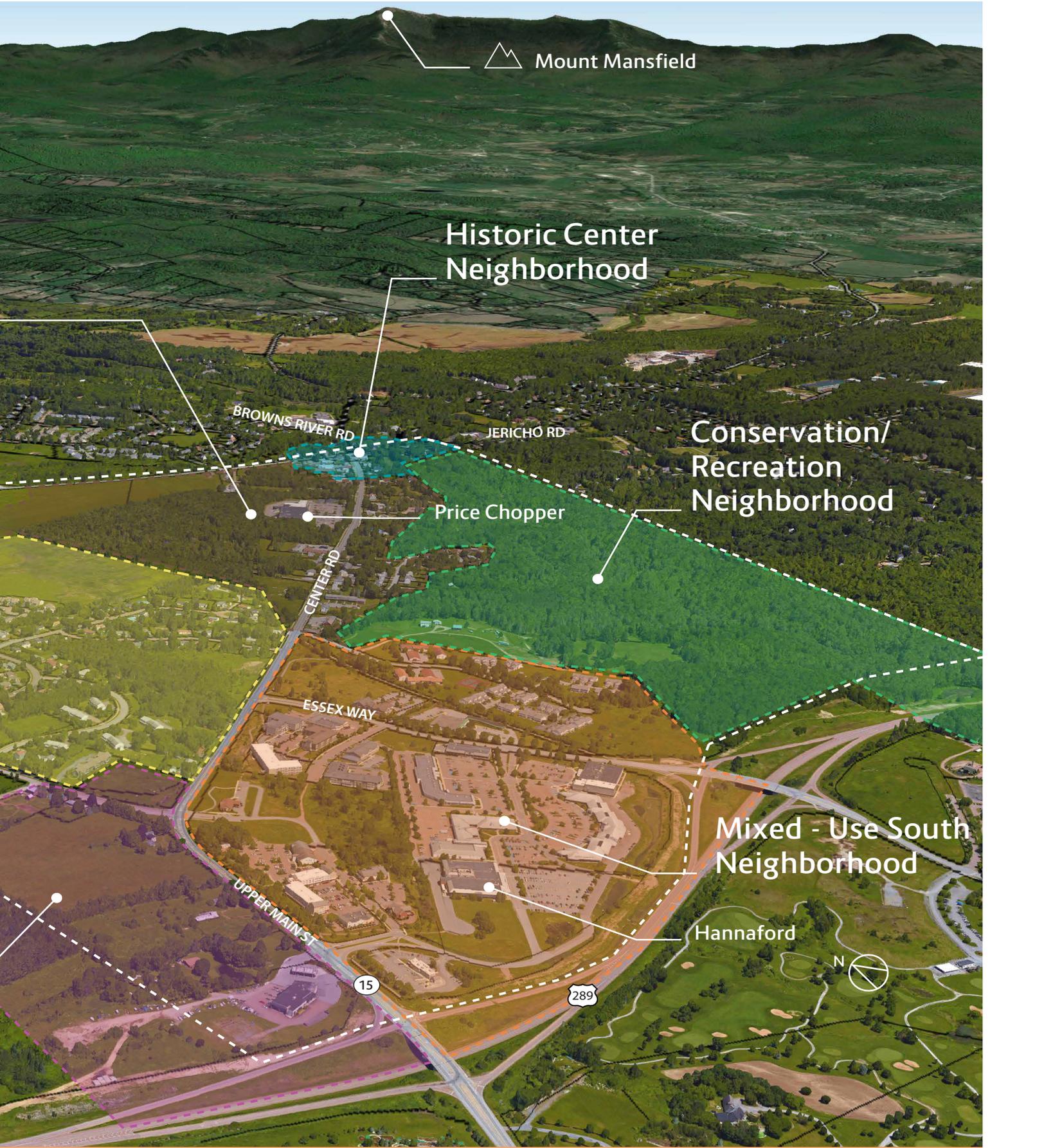
ESSEX WAY

UPPER MAIN ST

15

289

Hannaford





CHAPTER 1 - THE ETC EVOLVES

The Essex Town Center (“ETC”) has been a critical part of the long-term growth strategy for the Town of Essex. While, for many, the physical location of the ETC has been synonymous with the Essex Outlets, the area is, in fact, a collection of neighborhoods centered along VT Route 15, each with a distinct history, characteristics, and needs. Where the ETC sits in the larger landscape of Essex and surrounding communities is an important part of its identity and one that Essex seeks to preserve. It is home for many Essex residents, as well as a hub of retail and commercial activity. The ETC also enjoys some of the most spectacular long-range views of the Green Mountains in all of Chittenden County.

Since the original master plan for the ETC was crafted nearly 30 years ago (in 1991), a lot has changed, including:

- Commercial uses such as office, retail, and restaurants have historically occupied many parts of the ETC, but economic challenges in those sectors are placing pressure on their future viability.
- Residential uses within the ETC have become more diverse, moving beyond detached single-unit homes to meet a demand for higher density apartment buildings. These require clearer design standards to seamlessly integrate newer construction with the area’s architectural character.
- Regional traffic flows still rely on VT Route 15 (and nearby Vermont 289) to move commuters through the ETC, but structural changes, physical and societal, to lessen our dependence on single-occupancy vehicle trips are on the immediate horizon.
- Furthermore, water and sewer infrastructure planned to meet the needs outlined in prior Town Plans now will require changes to meet the demands of the newly planned and expanded ETC Growth Center.
- And not inconsequentially, the relationship between the Town and the Village is evolving; more collaboration is in the works.

It is these influences, and others, that will define the future of the ETC and its neighborhoods. While the overall distribution of land uses within the ETC has not changed much since 1991, the forms that uses have taken have become more diverse and continue to change the character of the ETC. This update to the ETC master plan reexamines this future, supporting outcomes that align with the overall objectives for the Town and enhance the quality of life for those who live, work and play in the ETC.

Which neighborhoods comprise the ETC?

BUTLERS CORNERS: Located at the intersection of VT Route 289 and Route 15, this site was slated for development as a mixed-use destination for area residents and visitors, the ideal location to benefit from the completion of the discontinued Chittenden County Circumferential Highway (CCCH) project. Vehicular and pedestrian circulation within this area is difficult, in part because of the lack of a grid orientation in the street system and a defined street edge in some sections. Established uses need to be reconsidered as The Essex Outlets and Cinema (also sometimes called the Shoppes and, currently, The Essex Experience), has been challenged by retail trends in online shopping. More recent developments in the area include a new restaurant/commercial building along VT Route 15. Approved master plans within this area may complicate making changes to the established land-use pattern. The areas in and around Butler's Corners have changed more than elsewhere in the ETC.



Policy Point: Diversify the Economy

Problem: The ETC's historic focus on retail left it struggling economically as the market shifted elsewhere.

Solution: Repurpose vacant commercial space for entertainment, dining, and "gig economy" offices and workspaces



HISTORIC CENTER: The Historic Center (aka “Essex Center”) is at the crossroads of Center Road (VT Route 15), Towers Road, Jericho Road, and Browns River Road (VT Route 128). This area functions both as a gateway to Essex and as the historic core with notable examples of historic architecture including important civic (e.g., community library, public works offices) and institutional structures. Much of this area is already built out and new development opportunities are limited. Some adaptive reuse of historic structures has occurred and should continue.



VT ROUTE 15 CORRIDOR: The pattern of development along VT Route 15 is a hodgepodge of residential and generally smaller scale commercial/retail businesses including a grocery store, general retail, personal services, restaurants, and automobile services. Residential developments dot the lands along the corridor with several residential subdivisions (e.g., Saybrook). There are multiple opportunities for infill development.



LANG FARM: The Lang Farm originally referred to 400+ acres of land that were subdivided into a mix of new developments in the 1970s and 1980s, including what is now the Essex Experience. Today, all the other lands are separated from the remainder of the ETC by the Circumferential Highway (VT-289) corridor. The 1991 Master Plan identified this area as a part of the ETC, but the integration between this area and the balance of the ETC is very difficult given the interchange. The Lang Farm area currently includes a neighborhood of single-unit dwellings, several condominium and apartment buildings, a memory care and assisted living facility, a resort, a large barn that is used for events (weddings, etc.) with an onsite bakery, and an 18-hole golf course bordered by extensive gardens.



GOLDEN TRIANGLE: The portion of the ETC north of VT Route 15 to where Old Stage and Towers Roads intersect was designated in the 1991 Master Plan as the “Golden Triangle” (owing to its color and shape on the zoning map). This was originally envisioned as a build-out area for the Town Center. Two large-lot residential subdivisions exist within this area, but the northern portion remains largely undeveloped because it is outside the sewer service core and the current zoning dictates low-density agricultural and rural residential land uses. Due to community concerns raised about the sprawling nature of development, the desire for preservation of working lands and scenic views, and the many constraints to development (wetlands, primary agricultural soils), intensive development in the northern portion of the Golden Triangle is unlikely and discouraged.



RELATIONSHIP TO EXISTING PLANS

Relationship to the 1991 ETC Master Plan



The 1991 Essex Town Center Master Plan describes the concept and community desires behind creating a “then”-new Town Center in Essex. It includes an analysis of the study area, the context for the Town Center, the design process, and the final design for the ETC. According to the 1991 Master Plan, the Town of Essex was ahead of the curve relative to many other communities in the US in its desire to create a new Town Center rather than promote the development of “self-contained, isolated ‘projects’ and ‘clusters’ served by individual private roads and accessible only by automobile travel on congested arterial highways.” The new ETC was envisioned as a “focus for growth and a center for community life” in the Town. The Plan stated “the Town Center should be

pedestrian-oriented and contain a mixture of residential, commercial, civic and cultural opportunities. The Center should be separated from other settlements by open lands.” Many of the goals in the 1991 plan continue to be relevant in the ETC.

The 1991 Town Center Master Plan had the following goals:

1. Ensure that Essex Center maintains its identity as the focal point for the community;
2. Develop a physical and psychological “center” for Essex that encourages a mix of residential, commercial, civic, and cultural uses to create a diverse, dynamic and people-oriented Essex Center;
3. Promote the development of an aesthetically pleasing environment through design control of buildings, the streetscape, and related open space;
4. Develop a safe, pedestrian-friendly transportation network for the Essex Center area;
5. Assure the provision of adequate infrastructure to support a more densely built Essex Center; and
6. Tie the Essex Center area to existing developments and open lands so that it remains a part of the community and not a series of individually developed parcels.

Relationship to the 2016 Town Plan

The 2016 Essex Town Plan notes the importance of the ETC as a population and employment node and a place the community would like to concentrate on new development. The “new Town Center” or “Town Center at Butlers Corners” is often spoken of differently than the “historic town center” or “Essex Center,” signaling a difference in how the community views these places. Trails, connectivity, and transportation are some of the most crucial considerations for this area. The idea of creating a walkable multi-use center in this area is reinforced throughout the document. Infill development, additional affordable housing, and co-working and maker spaces are important economic development considerations for the area.



Policy Point: Pull the Plan off the Shelf

Problem: Lots of plans, saying similar things over the years, fail to implement their goals in zoning and development.

Solution: Treat them as living documents, incorporate changes as they arise and keep the master plan more active in everyday decisions

As noted in the 2016 Town Plan, “Twenty-five years after the release of the Town Center Master Plan, full build-out of the new Town Center has yet to occur due to market conditions, the uncompleted Circumferential Highway, and other factors” (see page 89). Key aspects of this updated master plan address the recommendations from the Town Plan to “examine densities, infrastructure funding, uses and design control.”

Relationship to the 2008 Open Space Plan

Essex Open Space Plan 2008



The 2008 Open Space Plan states a broad community vision for open space resources as follows: “Important natural resources will be protected as part of a more extensive open lands policy. Strong encouragement will be given to those who continue productive use of farm and forestland. Other undeveloped lands will allow town residents to enjoy recreation and trail opportunities and will provide aesthetic benefits to the entire community.”

Land use and development goals for the Town Center are listed as follows: Preserve significant features; encourage non-motorized, multi-use paths; provide separation between built-up areas and countryside; promote a settlement pattern that protects major open spaces and views.

One important outcome of the 2008 Open Space Plan was the recognition that open space is not adequately defined as “greenspace” and that its character can and should change depending on surrounding land-use patterns. Plazas as defined by building fronts, parkways along transportation routes, and squares/greens were all identified in the 2008 Open Space Plan as representing appropriate open space types, with particular emphasis on civic open space that encouraged accessibility and value to the public.



Policy Point: Open Space and Views

Problem: New development may disrupt the many scenic views and important open spaces that contribute to the ETC’s unique sense of place.

Solution: Ensure that new buildings respond to integrate views and important places in the public realm; reclaim these places and views as redevelopment occurs.

Relationship to the 2011 Scenic Protection Manual

Supporting this vision for open space, Essex has identified specific scenic resources along roadways in town, including some around the edges of the ETC along Old Stage Road, Towers Road, and Jericho Road. These are described in the Town’s 2011 Views to the Mountain: A Scenic Protection Manual, which provides important context for the ETC and also aligns with one of the state’s major land use planning goals: “maintain the historic settlement pattern of compact village and urban centers separated by rural countryside.” Further analysis of scenic views within the ETC appears in Chapter 5 of this master plan.



READY FOR GROWTH

Underlying Zoning in the ETC

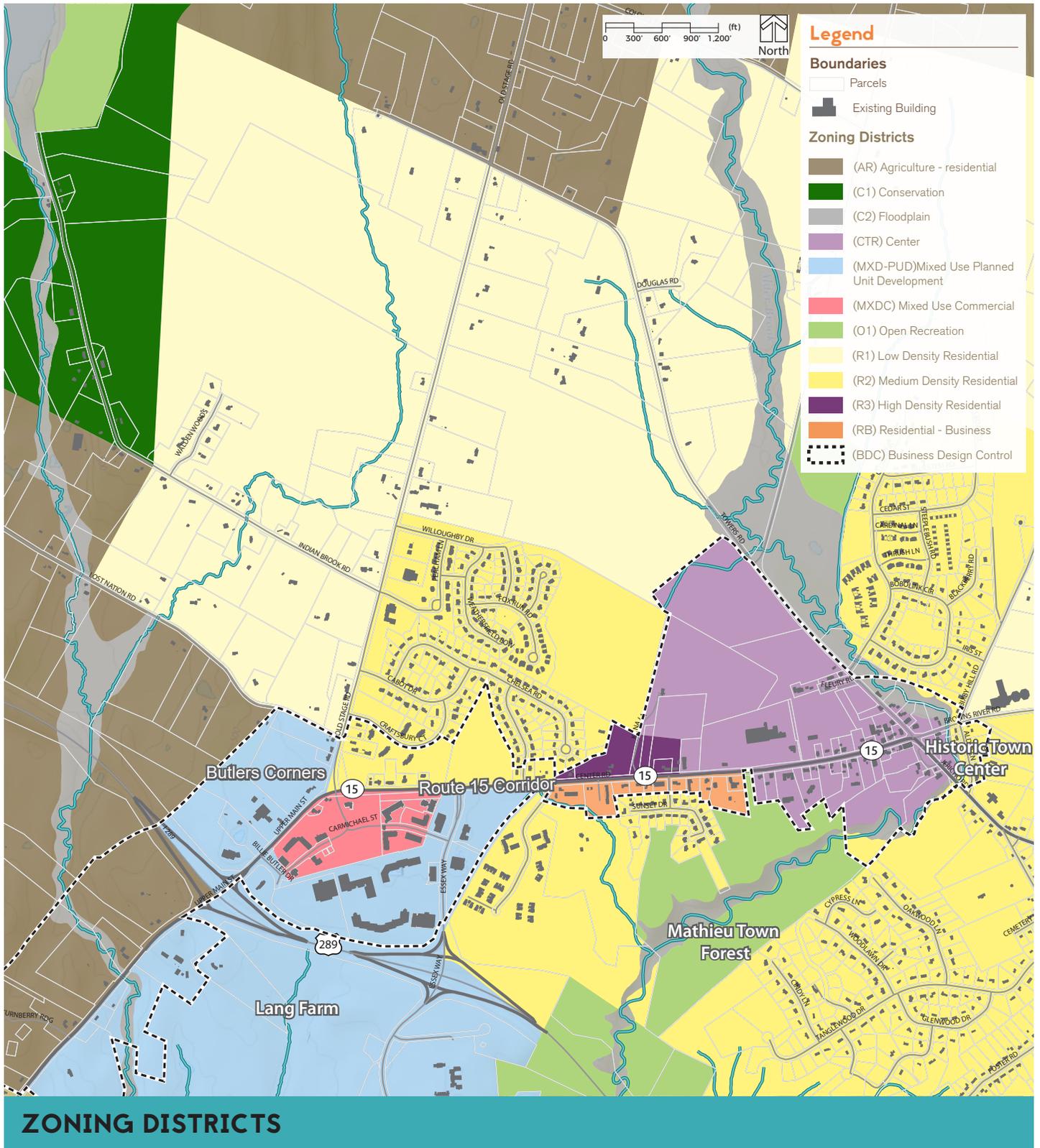
This plan intends to broadly define zoning goals that address key components of the development that the Town hopes to achieve in the ETC, including examination of appropriate densities, heights and uses. The zoning is further intended to support mobility, recreation and open space. Presently, the zoning patterns within the ETC include a spectrum from lower to higher densities and a diverse array of allowable uses. The most relevant zoning districts within the ETC are briefly summarized below (a more detailed review of existing zoning and land use regulations can be found in Appendix A).

Mixed-Use District-Commercial (MXD-C): The MXD-C district supports a wide range of retail and personal service shops, professional and governmental offices, and supportive, compatible commercial uses. Higher density residential uses add vitality to the area. The location and design of uses should enhance the existing structures in the area.

Retail Business (B1, part of the Mixed-Use Planned Unit Development or MXD-PUD): The southern part of the Butlers Corner area is zoned for general business like many other areas in Essex. This approach reflects visions in older master plans for a sub-regional retail center but fails to recognize the unique context of the Town Center (except for limiting automotive uses). Still, the wide variety of enabled uses have allowed the area to adapt to changing economic circumstances, while master planning has ensured some level of site and infrastructure coordination between adjacent developments.

Center (CTR): The Center district is located around the intersection of VT Route 15 and VT 128 and addresses the community desire to maintain the role of the Historic Essex Center as the focus of many social and cultural activities. The uses currently allowed include residential, civic, cultural, neighborhood commercial, home occupations, and others that serve the needs of the community. Design review within the neighborhood promotes a more traditional pattern of development that is appropriate to the historical context. The Center district includes portions of VT Route 15 west of the historic center where the form of development does not preserve the historic character seen at the intersection of VT 128 and VT Route 15.

Residential (R2 Medium Density, R3 High Density, and RB Residential-Business): There are several residential districts scattered along the VT Route 15 corridor, transitioning from somewhat low densities (2 dwellings per acre) around Old Stage Road, Saybrook Road, and Sunset Drive to moderate densities (4 dwellings per acre) and limited commercial uses closer to the Center District. These well-established neighborhoods are positioned to both support and benefit from commercial uses in the ETC while providing a diversity of housing options.



MUNICIPAL + ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRAINTS

Municipal Infrastructure to Support Growth

The sewer service area (“sewer core”) essentially acts as a growth management tool for the community, as much of the Town’s land use planning is focused on directing new development toward the Town Center and other planning areas within the sewer service area. A complementary planning goal within the Town Plan is the prevention of excess development on rural land outside the municipal sewer service boundary. Outside of Butlers Corners, Lang Farm, Essex Center, and existing residential areas, development is encouraged to be clustered, and multi-unit dwellings are discouraged.

The Town Plan also states, “The Town should consider additional analysis to address the possible expansion of the sewer core area that enhances the Town Center. If the analysis occurs, it must consider the consequences of additional growth and sprawl.” At present the sewer core and zoning maps do not fully align with property boundaries, which may limit otherwise favorable development options.

Furthermore, the overall allocation of sewer capacity for lands in the ETC is generally low. The 2011 sewer allocation map identifies the sewer capacity assigned to parcels within the core, including those with approved allocation capacity as well as those with assigned allocation but no development approval. The sewer core map is based on current zoning, existing development and estimates of future development potential identified under existing zoning densities. As zoning density changes, the allocation of capacity within the core will need to change. In effect, a redistribution of capacity within the existing sewer core will be needed.

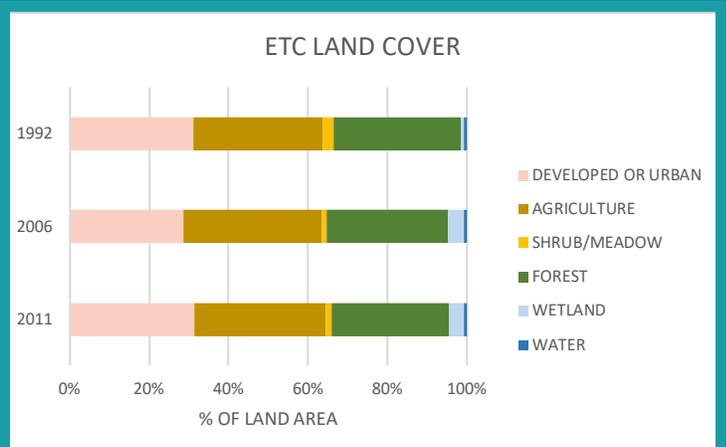
Similarly, while the volume of potable water available within the ETC is sufficient, a primary issue impacting future growth is the inadequacy of water pressure and flows. The Town has been examining these infrastructure issues and has identified several potential strategies to address them - including public-private investments.

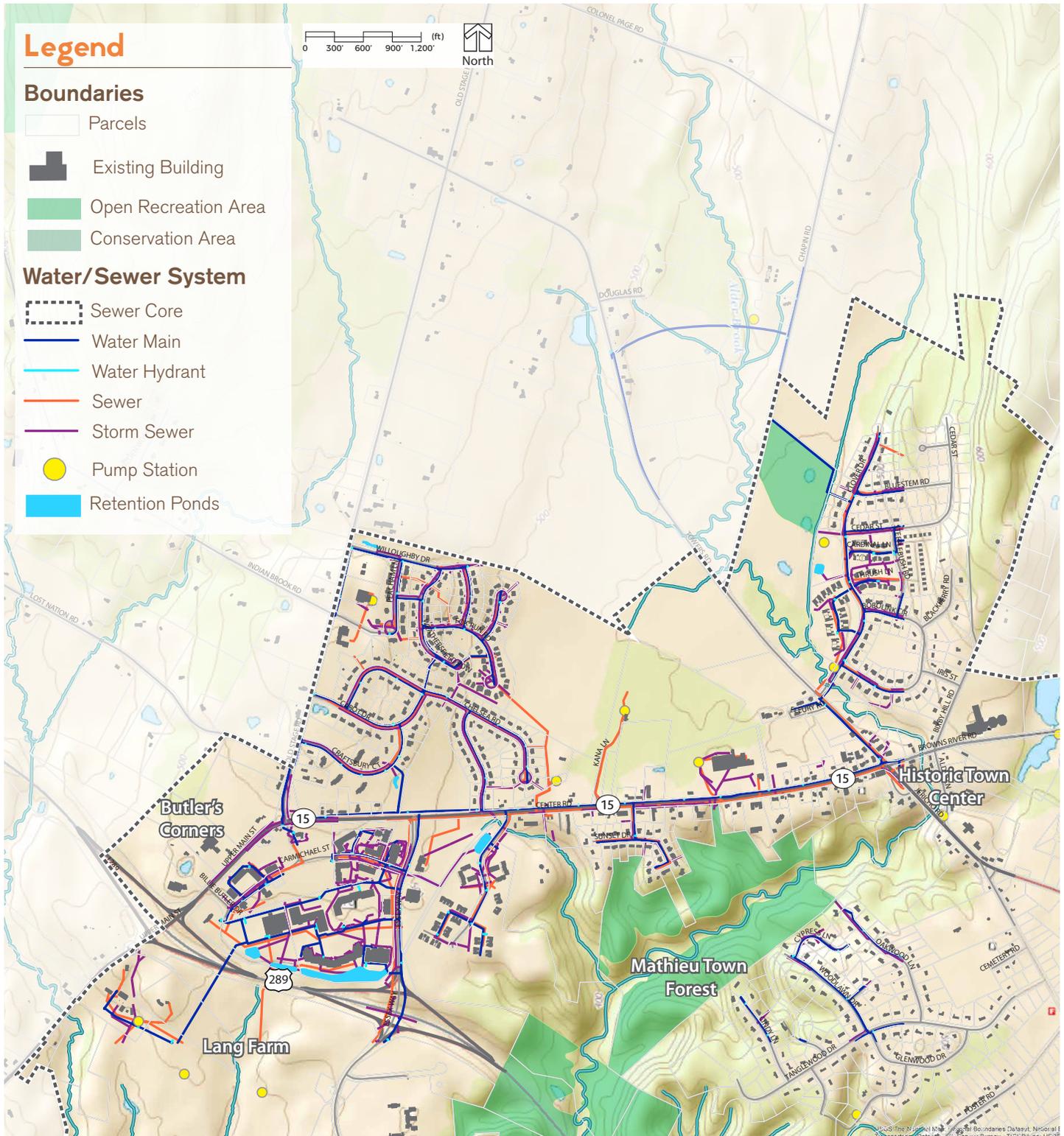
As the ETC continues to evolve, local policies are needed to guide the Town in its support for the development of critical infrastructure.

AN EVOLVING ETC?

Has Much has the ETC Changed since 1991?

Land cover data obtained from VCGI covering 1992 and 2011 was examined to determine the relative changes in land use. As the graph to the right shows, the scope of development has only increased slightly within the overall ETC.





WATER AND SEWER SERVICE AREAS DEFINE WHERE GROWTH HAPPENS

Preserving Important Natural Resources

Soils and Habitats: The areas in and around the ETC are impacted in some ways by the presence of agricultural soils (prime and statewide) and defined wildlife habitat blocks. The Environmental Constraints Map highlights the distribution of these features relative to the existing pattern of development.

Agricultural Soils: According to data from the Vermont Department of Agriculture, a majority of the lands along the VT Route 15 corridor and extending south to Interstate 289 and North towards the Golden Triangle are considered either prime agricultural soils or of statewide importance.

In areas where development has not taken place, the impacts on statewide and prime agricultural soils will be considered and may require mitigation.

The viability of soils for onsite septic and stormwater treatment may also influence the potential development pattern if municipal utilities are not provided.

Habitat Blocks: According to the 2014 Vermont Habitat Blocks and Habitat Connectivity Report prepared by the VT Department of Fish and Wildlife, two areas within the ETC are identified as habitat blocks.

The southernmost of these two areas is the Mathieu Town Forest, which serves as both an interior forest block and connecting riparian habitat for many wildlife species. The northern area (of about 39 acres) is a large wetland complex located on private lands that supports a diversity of plant species while providing cover connecting habitat and food sources for rare and endangered birds and amphibians. Both areas are unlikely to see significant development due to physical constraints (steep slopes and wet soils, respectively), but it is important to consider the ecological impact of development adjacent to these areas, primarily increased stormwater runoff.

Wetlands: The pattern of wetlands within the ETC is largely defined by the riparian corridors associated with Alder Brook and Indian Brook. Several small drainages link these riparian areas with lands along VT Route 15, and the preservation and protection of these resource lands will be important as the density and intensity of development in the ETC increases. One large mapped class II wetland was identified within the ETC on private lands just north of VT Route 15.

Due to their value for flood mitigation and wildlife habitat, under state law impacts to wetlands must be avoided or mitigated, which will pose some difficulty to development within the ETC. The need to avoid impacts to these larger wetland areas and the likely presence of smaller class III wetlands will shape and define what land can be developed.

The ETC Next Master Plan should respond to this pattern of resource lands by defining land-use objectives that address the realities of development in these areas while assuring the ETC maximizes its future potential as a hub of growth and economic development within the Town.



CHAPTER 2 - CRAFTING A VISION

A good master plan starts with a vision. This chapter summarizes the overall vision and presents a conceptual build-out plan for the ETC that explores how character is expressed at a neighborhood scale. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 expand this vision further in the context of community mobility, open space/recreation and gateways, respectively, to support a better connected and more cohesive ETC.

Overall Vision

Based on the input provided by the public and with guidance from the Steering Committee, an updated vision statement for the ETC was crafted:

The Essex Town Center or the ETC is a diverse community within the Town of Essex that has grown from its historic beginnings near Towers Road to extend along VT Route 15 to its intersection with VT 289. Within this corridor, distinctive and interconnected neighborhoods have matured to support a wide variety of residential, retail, civic, commercial, and recreational land uses.

These neighborhoods are linked together and to the broader region through an integrated multi-modal transportation network, a shared and pervasive wayfinding system, and a common palette of streetscape and landscape elements, while retaining an architectural expression that reinforces their unique character.

The vision speaks to the important community needs of making the ETC better connected and more cohesive.

SEEKING COMMUNITY INPUT

Municipal Infrastructure to Support Growth

Community input for this plan included several major engagement initiatives to craft the vision for the ETC. Key aspects of this engagement included:

- a Steering Committee comprised of community members representing diverse backgrounds and perspectives that met over four meetings during a year-long process.
- a Community Focus Group meeting in May 2017 that explored design, mobility and open space/recreation issues.
- a web-based Community Survey conducted between late spring and early summer in 2017 that sought input on many of the elements discussed at the Focus Group meeting.
- a Community Open House held in October 2017 to present initial ideas on the vision and seek community inputs.
- a Selectboard Meeting in October 2017 that provided an update on the project and a presentation of the overall vision.
- an ETC | Next Presentation to the Planning Commission in February 2018 that outlined the vision and described the master plan document.

A series of additional meetings with the Planning Commission that highlighted various components of the plan (i.e., connectivity, open space, building forms) were held between April 2018 and March 2019. The project team worked closely with the Town of Essex Planning and Public Works staff during the development of the plan. Brief highlights of the various community outreach efforts are provided below. The full results from the focus group and community survey are provided in Appendix A.



COMMUNITY FOCUS GROUP MEETING

KEY INPUTS TO THE VISION

Shaping how the ETC Evolves

The following important goals to inform the vision for the ETC were refined through the analysis process, community engagement process and the work of the Steering Committee. The overarching consensus was to maintain the focus of the ETC as a “Shopping and Entertainment Neighborhood” with the mixed-use center area as the highlight.

MOTORIZED CONNECTIVITY – Assure the continued flow of traffic through the VT Route 15 corridor and address the impact of new residential growth. Plan for changing patterns in mobility, including greater inclusion of transit within the ETC.

NON-MOTORIZED CONNECTIVITY – Improve bicycle accommodation, linkages to existing trails, sidewalk segments and crossing points for pedestrians.

RECREATION – Support a mix of neighborhood and destination-focused recreation (both indoor spaces and parks) combined with pocket parks and functional “urban” open spaces where appropriate.

DIVERSIFY THE ECONOMY – Encourage a mix of local and destination retail within the ETC with a greater emphasis on dining and entertainment uses. Create an “experience” for residents and visitors alike.

OPEN SPACE AND VIEWS – Assure the preservation of open space, establish more diversity in open/civic spaces and prioritize long-range views when addressing new development.

DISTINCTIVE ARCHITECTURE – Focus design on less “boxy” forms, with varied massing, using architectural elements like porches and arcades and encourage diverse roof forms and rooflines. Buildings will have clearly defined entry points. Strive for unique character and quality in architectural outcomes with traditional materials such as wood and brick but enable diverse design expression based on the neighborhood context.

HEIGHT/MASS AND SCALE – Protect long-range views of mountains with appropriate building siting and/or building setbacks designed to highlight significant views. Buildings should have a well-articulated street level that relates to a human scale. Horizontal and/or vertical articulation of the facade using architectural elements, material textures, etc. should be used to break up large masses and windowless expanses on all facades.

DENSITY AND FORM – Encourage higher densities for residential uses in areas where access is good, where infrastructure supports it and where it best serves to revitalize and invigorate local retail and commercial uses. Support a diverse mix of housing units to maintain affordability within the ETC.

FUNCTIONAL SITE DESIGN – Assure that buildings relate to pedestrians and the site in clear and meaningful ways, including distinct articulation of the building at grade. Buildings should be sited in relation to the established street grid or use landscaping elements such as pavers, street furniture, etc. to create a relationship with the sidewalk in a way that encourages pedestrian movement.

Parking should be underneath, behind or to the side of buildings, to the extent possible, to reduce its visible and physical prominence. Where visible, it should be screened with landscaping or hardscape: shrubs, sitting walls, etc. Shade trees should be integrated into the landscape and parking plan.

VISUAL PREFERENCE FOR THE ETC

Getting Input on Design

As a part of the community engagement process for the Master Plan update, the public was asked to provide input on their preferences for design outcomes. Using a “visual preference” survey method, applied at both the community open house event and through the community survey, respondents were asked to review a series of design images and rank them.

Not unexpectedly, many respondents had very favorable responses to design images that reflected traditional Vermont architectural styles and vernacular, for instance, gabled roofs were favored more often than flat roofs, but respondents recognized that architectural character within the ETC can (and perhaps should) vary based on the use and in context with the setting. What might make sense in one part of the ETC might not in another. Images that showed greater accommodations for pedestrians, for functional green space and increased amounts of landscaping were also more highly ranked.

A more complete summary and results from the Visual Preference Survey can be found in Appendix A; specific recommendations to achieve the design outcomes identified in the survey can be found in the ETC Design Guide.



Policy Point: Architecture

Problem: The lack of a consistent architectural style in the ETC that reflects traditional forms fails to create a sense of place.

Solution: Identify and require architectural features that reinforce the area’s design character while allowing variation. Emphasize that buildings are an important part of wayfinding and placemaking in the ETC.



VISUAL PREFERENCE - LOW RANKING



VISUAL PREFERENCE - NEUTRAL RANKING



VISUAL PREFERENCE - HIGH RANKING



RECOMMENDED NEIGHBORHOODS

The ETC area has been broken down into six neighborhoods, reflective of the input received during the process. Overall, 658 acres are encompassed in these neighborhoods. The boundaries for these neighborhoods are shown graphically and described in detail below.

Mixed-Use South

The Mixed-Use South (MUS) Neighborhood functions as a sub-regional retail center with growing and diverse residential and mixed residential/commercial uses. Anticipated uses include retail (including locally and regionally serving and entertainment), multi-unit housing, accommodations (hotel) and commercial spaces (professional services, incubator, and office). Target densities in the neighborhood are significantly higher than adjacent zones, reflecting the considerable access afforded by the VT 289 interchange(s) and VT Route 15.

The proposed form for new development within the neighborhood supports the planned use mix and densities with new structures between two and five stories. This form will contain higher density mixed residential/commercial uses within an integrated and grid-oriented growth center setting. Development in this neighborhood should maintain a greenbelt along Route 15 and design access around already established public roads or existing access points. Underground or structured ground-level parking is encouraged to support higher densities and minimize surface parking lots. New roads within the neighborhood connect with adjacent developments, and parking is shared across properties, supported by agreements between property owners. All accessory structures and supporting infrastructure will be appropriately screened, well-maintained and hygienic for the benefit of residents, visitors and businesses.

As a hub, the Mixed-Use South Neighborhood provides connections to existing local and regional pedestrian, recreation and transit systems which are integrated into the fabric of new development. Open spaces incorporate resource protection areas as amenities using green infrastructure, with civic spaces including greens, parks, plazas that support local neighborhoods, public gatherings and events.



MIXED-USE SOUTH

Mixed-Use North

The Mixed-Use North (MUN) Neighborhood functions in concert with the Mixed-Use South Neighborhood but with greater emphasis on diverse residential and mixed residential / commercial uses. Anticipated uses include limited retail, housing (single, duplex and multi-unit), accommodations (hotel) and commercial spaces (professional services, incubator and office). Target densities in this neighborhood are moderately higher than existing zoning, enabled by the considerable regional connections afforded by the VT 289 interchange and VT Route 15.

The proposed forms for new development within the neighborhood support the planned use mix and densities with new structures between two and four stories. Shared surface and structured ground-level parking are encouraged to support higher densities. New roads within the neighborhood should connect with adjacent developments and should avoid new access points to VT Route 15 to reduce traffic congestion. A generous setback from VT Route 15 is suggested to build upon the established “greenbelt.”

All accessory structures and supporting infrastructure will be appropriately screened, well-maintained and hygienic for the benefit of residents, visitors and businesses.

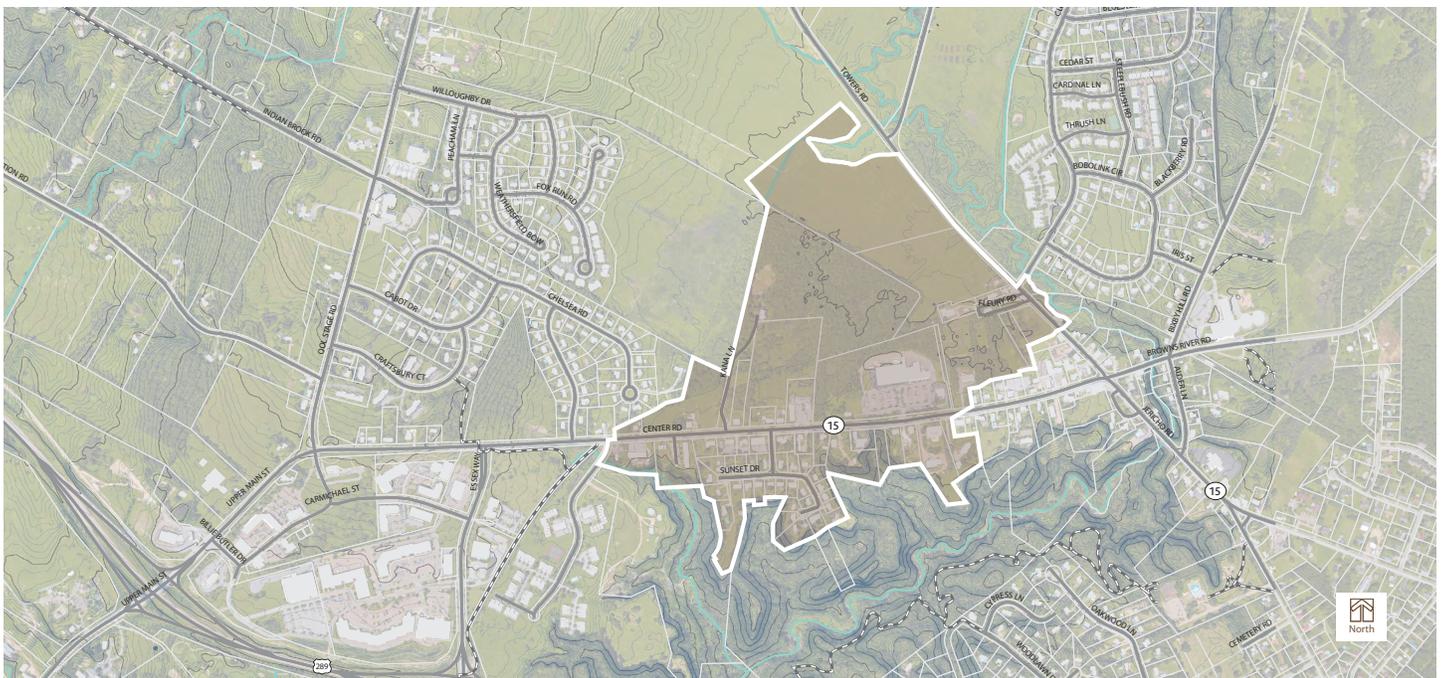


MIXED-USE NORTH

Neighborhood Commercial

The Neighborhood Commercial (NC) area is a vital link between the Historic Center and the Mixed-Use Center neighborhoods. Because of its linearity, this neighborhood's relationship with VT Route 15 is an intimate one – establishing generous pedestrian accommodations and setbacks from the roadway is vital. Defining clear crossing points along VT Route 15 enhances bicycle and pedestrian mobility within the neighborhood. Consolidating access points to existing or new businesses simplifies vehicular movements and reclaims front yards for landscaping, sidewalks and streetscape elements. Increases in residential density (in the form of cottage units, duplex, small-lot single-family homes, etc.) will come from infill development taking advantage of deep lots along VT Route 15 and underdeveloped lands. Some higher density mixed development is possible along VT Route 15 as the result of redevelopment but avoiding strip-oriented development is a priority.

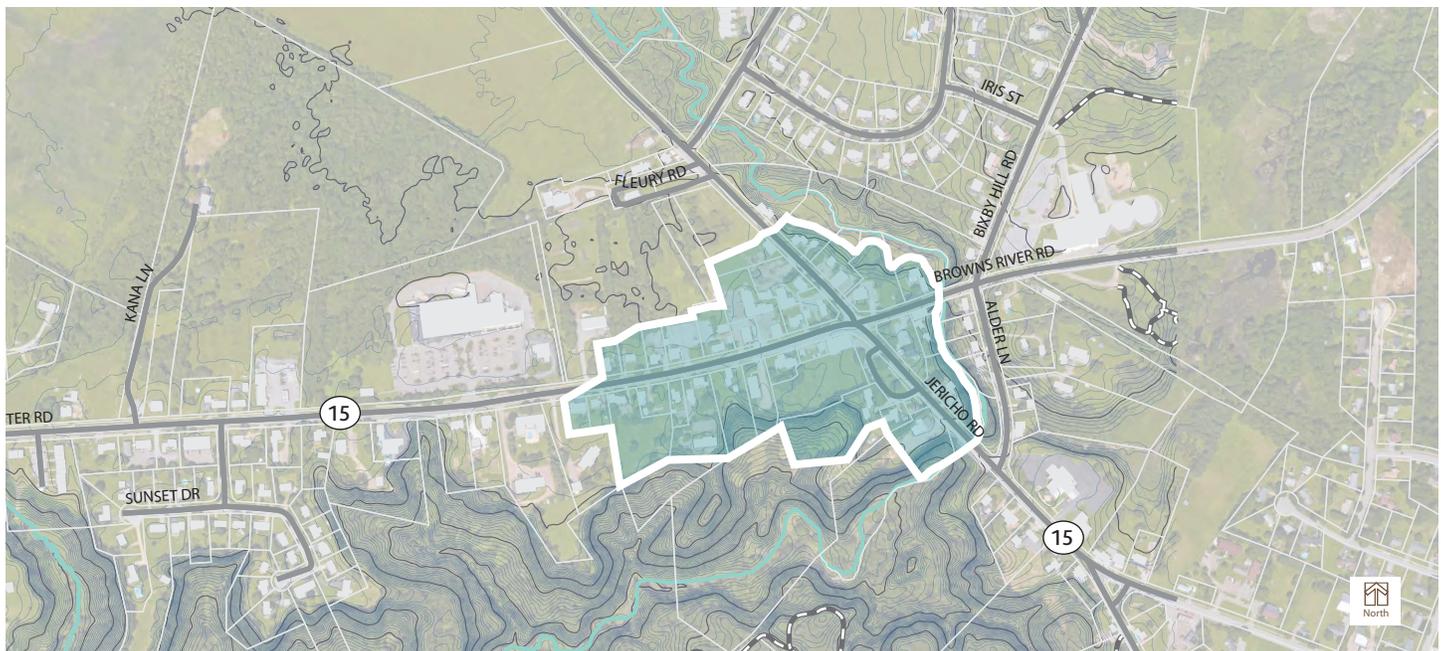
The visual identity and messaging established within the Historic Center continues within this neighborhood but focuses more strongly on reinforcement (directional, wayfinding) rather than gateway/arrival. The type, density and form of development takes on a somewhat more “urban” character, to include a greater mix of commercial and residential uses, increasingly higher densities and a greater variety of architectural expression. A more clustered, nodal form of development within this neighborhood is encouraged.



NEIGHBORHOOD COMMERCIAL

Historic Center

The Historic Center (HC) Neighborhood serves as both a reminder of the traditional settlement patterns within Essex and as a welcoming gateway to the ETC along VT Route 15 from places to the east. The historical architecture found within this neighborhood should be celebrated and preserved to the greatest extent possible, while allowing the area to adapt to the changing needs of residents and businesses. Important civic spaces within the neighborhood should be prominently featured and the pedestrian experience and scale of new development and improvements should reflect the existing character. Improving the gateway experience in this neighborhood can serve to calm traffic and establish a design character that can be borrowed elsewhere in the ETC to enhance visual cohesion.



HISTORIC CENTER



EVALUATING BUILD-OUT POTENTIAL

The vision concept illustrates a pattern of development that supports residential and non-residential uses and suggests how new uses might integrate with existing developments. The vision concept offers an exploration of supportive design features for elements such as open space, recreation and transportation.

Overall, the existing pattern of development is not expected to change significantly. Areas along VT Route 15 and within the Historic Center neighborhood are expected to have only modest infill development. Areas within the Mixed-Use North and South neighborhoods are expected to have more significant development (or redevelopment), with a greater concentration of mixed-use forms and increased residential density and, possibly, a small reduction in total non-residential space. The Neighborhood Commercial area is expected to see some limited new residential development and conversion of older residential to mixed uses. Also, the pace of growth within the ETC has generally been slow (since 1991, only about 100 new residential units have been constructed) and this pace is expected to continue.

It is important to recognize that the concept's primary purpose is to help illustrate what might be possible and, in so doing, support Essex as it seeks to better align new growth with the community's needs and objectives. The specific needs and objectives of private landowners will inform the potential outcome, as will site-specific constraints and limitations such as wetlands. Furthermore, issues around the availability of adequate fire flow, changes to sewer allocation policies and local control of VT Route 15 have not been completely addressed. Resolving these issues in ways that balance the benefits of a vital ETC against the potential costs to the Town will be part of the ongoing work needed to implement this master plan.



Policy Point: Role of the ETC

Problem: The success of the ETC was envisioned around the installation of the Circumferential Highway, highly dependent on vehicular traffic and access.

Solution: Shift the focus to supporting residents and multi-modal access; reclaim underutilized space for housing, businesses and recreation. Re-envision the potential for the ETC.

VISION CONCEPT

Key Land Use Features

Based on the overall vision narrative and public inputs, a conceptual plan was created to reflect a potential future for the ETC. It is important to stress that this is only a concept representative of the densities, forms, connections and patterns envisioned; any new development must reflect and be consistent with enabled zoning and local resource constraints. Details of this analysis are provided in Appendix B.

The build-out suggests that the ETC could support approximately 1,284 residential dwelling units, or an increase of about 807 units from today. The ETC has just over 600,000 gross square feet of non-residential uses, most of which can be retained with mixed-use forms even with expanded residential development.

- 1 Existing and new residential subdivisions should complement existing and new mixed-use development.
- 2 New residential development in this area should support diverse forms, including but not limited to cottage and small multi-family units.
- 3 A greater commercial orientation within this area should take advantage of the prime location adjacent to VT 289.
- 4 Reconfigure Billie Butler Drive, perhaps with a roundabout, to improve circulation and better define a gateway.
- 5 When redeveloped, transition single-story retail buildings into multi-level structures. Higher densities and heights in this area take advantage of lower base elevations.
- 6 New residential infill should expand off of established access points on VT Route 15, and extend paths and sidewalks.
- 7 Study the potential for new residential development adjacent to the existing shopping center that connects with and leverages an existing signalized intersection.
- 8 New residential areas take advantage of deeper existing lots and potential access from Towers Road. Cottage style forms support housing diversity within the ETC.
- 9 Study opportunities for redevelopment or adaptive reuse of existing structures near the corner lot to open up views of the cemetery.



VISION CONCEPT - LAND USE



CHAPTER 3 - MOBILITY AND CONNECTIVITY - BRINGING THE ETC TOGETHER

VT Route 15 bisects the ETC, provides the primary access to many existing uses and was a profound driver in the development of the vision. To effectively weave the ETC together, new infrastructure may be needed in support of community mobility and access.

Important Destinations

As the ETC evolves, its western edge near Butlers Corners will see the greatest amount of residential growth. While the area south of Route 15 has a partially complete road and sidewalk network, greenfield development to the north may require a new connection to Lost Nation Road, which will avoid multiple separate curb cuts on the state highway.

Not inconsequentially, on the eastern edge of the ETC along VT- 128 is the **Essex Elementary School**. Going forward, efforts to enhance walkability within the ETC should consider this destination.

The **Essex Free Library, Memorial Hall** and the historic **Green at Essex Center** are all important destinations in the ETC. Assuring bike and pedestrian access to these destinations as well as appropriate arrival accommodations (bike racks, bike parking, etc.) is a priority of the vision. Bike racks can also serve as a form of functional public art.

The vision anticipates a future where the now rebranded **Essex Experience (formerly the Essex Shoppes and Cinema)** is redeveloped into a denser and more walkable urban environment, for which connectivity and mobility will play a critical role. Internally, Commonwealth Avenue will be the spine of the ETC, providing the primary gateway between the residential and commercial areas. Attention will need to be paid to pedestrian connections and bike facilities. Additionally, finding a “loop” around this area could serve the ETC well by allowing area residents to bypass the commercial environment and connect to nearby open spaces such as the **Mathieu Town Forest**, though its steep ravines may prevent access.



BIKE RACK PUBLIC ART

SHARING THE ROAD AHEAD

VT Route 15 continues to have significant regional importance for transportation and is a defining part of the ETC. VT Route 15 is currently a State Highway and according to 2015 Vermont Agency of Transportation data has an average annual daily traffic flow (AADT) of about 14,000 vehicles per day as measured at the intersection of VT Route 15 and Old Stage Road.

Several recently completed studies identified important issues and opportunities to take better advantage of the ETC's location for regional transit and better connect lands within the ETC.

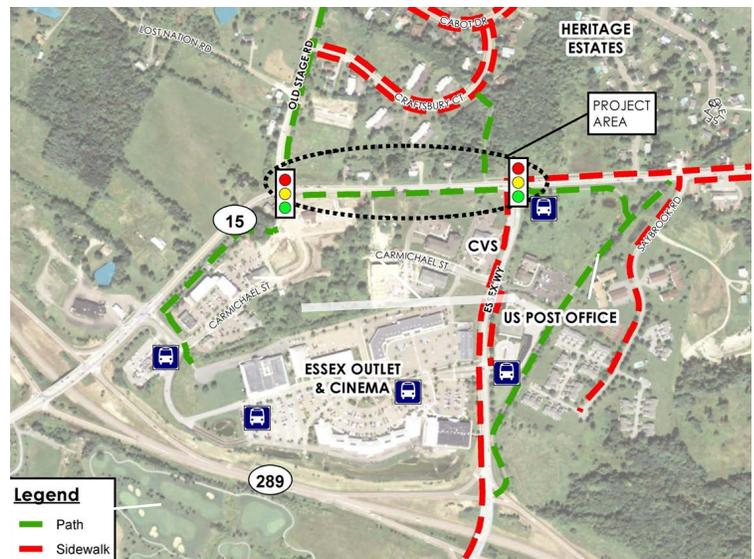
The VT Route 15 Corridor Study examines a 10 mile stretch of VT Route 15 from Winooski through the study area. It is a comprehensive multi-modal transportation improvement plan that offers suggestions on public transit, roadway design, and land use. It envisions Route 15 as a safe and pleasant transportation corridor for vehicles, public transit, cyclists, and pedestrians. Circulation and mobility are enhanced with roadway improvements such as turn lanes and roundabouts near VT-289. Conflicts between vehicles, pedestrians, and cyclists are minimized through additional shoulders, shared-use paths, and sidewalks. Transfer between modes is easy with a frequent, convenient, and efficient transit service and an extensive sidewalk network. A Bus Rapid Transit system and park and ride lot near VT-289 would encourage commuters to use public transit, reducing congestion.

According to the study, with the ETC zoned for mixed-use, more residential units are needed to make it a desirable place to live, work, and shop. The plan suggests a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) process to support the Old Stage Road area as a dense, walkable development while preserving the rural character of other areas of Essex. Finally, gateway signage at all approaches to Route 15 would calm traffic, enhance the aesthetic environment, and communicate the unique identity of the area.

The Vermont Route 15 Park & Ride - Bus Stop Study analyzes potential stop sites along VT Route 15 between Jeffersonville and Essex. With the Circumferential Highway deemed not viable in 2011, local authorities planned alternate routes of transit for residents. The Chittenden County Planning Commission and the Chittenden County Transportation Authority (now Green Mountain Transit), along with the Lamoille County Planning Commission developed a commuter bus route from Jeffersonville, through Essex, to Burlington. The route stops once in each town along the route, with the study identifying the best site in each town. The study considered the number of parking spaces, ease of access for the bus, user access without crossing Route 15, proximity to village centers and potential users, legal restrictions, landowner willingness, and the amount of necessary development for the site.

For Essex, the study deemed the former Essex Outlets and Cinema (now Essex Experience) parking lot, adjacent to VT Route 289, the best possible site. According to the study, on the eastern edge of the lot, there are about 50 spaces near the movie theater that are empty during the day and could be used for commuters. The site is adjacent to existing bicycle and walking facilities which, with improvements to signage and pedestrian/bike signaling, would allow for safe and relatively easy pedestrian access and circulation.

The Vermont Route 15 – Old Stage Road to Essex Way Sidewalk Feasibility Study addresses a short stretch along Route 15 without a sidewalk. A sidewalk exists along Route 15 from Route 128, the eastern edge of the study area, up to Essex Way. The sidewalk disappears between Essex Way and Old Stage Road, which constitutes a 1,225 foot (0.21 miles) stretch. Sidewalks exist along Old Stage Road, but pedestrians headed west along Route 15 must cross the road twice to reach Old Stage Road. The need for sidewalks in this area is widely acknowledged. It is a heavily trafficked area, especially at peak hours, and has become an area of concern for pedestrians. The Town may be able to include a sidewalk or easements as it undertakes an upgrade of the water main in this area.



**OLD STAGE ROAD TO ESSEX WAY
FEASIBILITY STUDY**

Green Mountain Transit’s (GMT’s) NextGEN Transit Plan was approved recently (2019) and makes changes to bus service within the ETC. GMT has long provided bus service within the ETC, connecting Essex Center to Essex Junction (at the Amtrak Station) via VT Route 15. According to GMT ridership data, about 89 riders use the service on weekdays with most boarding happening at the Essex Center stop. GMT considers the route to have “low” productivity, in part because it is one-directional, making for long wait times.

The new “Orange Line” service provides transit connectivity between the ETC (at the Essex Experience) to Maple Tree Place and Walmart in Williston, with connections to the Amtrak station and Global Foundries. While these changes reflect the current lack of ridership, they maintain the connection between the ETC and the broader transit system, both during the week and on weekends.

KEY DRIVERS IN TRANSPORTATION

Fixes to Make the ETC Work

As many of the recent transportation studies for the ETC have noted, fixing the connectivity within the ETC is less about significant geometric changes to VT Route 15 and more about making adjustments that improve pedestrian crossings, limit new access along the corridor, and address a future where regional transit is more commonplace and necessary.

The Town has expressed an interest in assuring that the flow of traffic along VT Route 15 is not impacted by new residential and commercial growth. As the ETC evolves, ongoing monitoring of growth and its impacts is needed in collaboration with VTrans.



Policy Point: Connectivity

Problem: How do we increase connectivity and mobility in the ETC, beyond the needs of cars?

Solution: We need to think comprehensively and prepare infrastructure to provide multiple options to serve the varied needs of Essex walkers, bikers and drivers.

Under the Town’s Standard Specifications for Construction, development must take a “Complete Streets” approach. As described by Smart Growth America, “Complete streets are streets designed for everyone. They are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders of all ages and abilities. Complete Streets “make it easy to cross the street, walk to shops, and bicycle to work.” As well, the Vermont 2018 Green Streets Guide underscores the importance of urban infrastructure, championing superior street design for traffic and human activity. The “Green Street” framework relies on 3 pillars: Green Stormwater Infrastructure, Mobility, and articulating aspects of Placemaking – goals that are consistent with the vision for the ETC. Streets should be designed to be consistent with the Vermont Green Streets guide which *“takes a complete view of the street, seeing stormwater as a resource, universal mobility as a priority, and plants as co-engineers of a complex built environment. It reimagines a singular street design that efficiently prioritizes multiple uses and recognizes the unique value of shared spaces.”*

TRANSPORTATION IMPROVEMENTS

Assuring a Place for People in the ETC

An important measure of success in the evolution of the ETC will be how well “connected” it is. The vision for the ETC anticipates a series of transportation changes within the neighborhoods to connect people better to place and increase the visibility of bicycles. Additionally, the vision suggests several trail connections to integrate the ETC with adjacent and future open spaces, parks, and outdoor recreation venues.

Improvement Types

The proposed improvements for mobility fall under four (4) broad categories as described below:



SIDEWALKS: Throughout the ETC, new sidewalks should be a minimum of 6 feet in width but can vary depending on the street type. Important segments to complete include along VT Route 15, north of the Mixed-Use Center and upgrades along VT Route 15 near the Historic Center. In some locations along VT Route 15, the sidewalk could potentially be expanded to between 8 and 10 feet to function as a multi-use path. Additional sidewalk area will increase snow removal needs.



SIDEWALK WITH BICYCLE ACCOMMODATIONS



CROSSWALKS: Curb extensions or bulb-outs at critical crossing points can provide real benefits that enhance the pedestrian crossing experience. In some locations, a raised median might be useful as a pedestrian refuge. The use of “ladder” style crosswalks improves visibility. Consistent crosswalk signage and rapid flashing beacons are beneficial to alert motorists, but mid-block crossings should be avoided in favor of crossings at controlled intersections.



CROSSWALK WITH RAISED MEDIAN



LADDER STYLE CROSSWALK



MULTI-USE PATH: Surfaced paths (most likely surfaced in asphalt) of between 8 and 10 feet in width and within a 15-foot right-of-way serve the diverse needs of pedestrians and bicycles. Increasing the width of a segment of sidewalk along VT Route 15 to a multi-use path would essentially expand the bike path and encourage mobility across all neighborhoods of the ETC.



MULTI-USE PATH - NATURAL



MULTI-USE PATH IN GREENBELT



TRAIL: These more informal pathways can be natural surfaces and of varying widths. Creating “trailhead” locations within the ETC to the adjacent Mathieu Town Forest and other natural open spaces as they emerge can help keep residents and visitors connected to the outdoors. Promotion of accessible trails helps improve their appeal.



NATURAL SURFACE TRAIL

VISION CONCEPT

Key Transportation and Mobility Improvements

While major improvements to the ETC have occurred to date, the vision anticipates additional changes to make it easier for pedestrians to move throughout and for new developments to feel connected and accessible. Key recommendations in the vision include:

- 1 A road connection between the Mixed-Use North Neighborhood and Lost Nation Road that reduces access to VT Route 15 and promotes greater walkability to Indian Brook Park.
- 2 Explore measures along VT Route 15 to minimize pedestrian conflicts, slow traffic and affirm the gateway experience.
- 3 Improved pedestrian connections across VT Route 15 with better gateway features at Commonwealth and the continuation of a multi-use path within the greenbelt.
- 4 A new sidewalk on the north side of VT Route 15 between the crosswalk at Essex Way and an existing sidewalk along Old Stage Road.
- 5 A new multi-use “Loop” along VT 289 and connecting with the Essex Bike Path to provide local mobility around the shopping center and better access to existing or potential parklands.
- 6 An improved crosswalk to connect to a multi-use path (see #6 on next page) into the Price Chopper lot to support potential infill development.
- 7 The continuation of a multi-use path segment across Towers Road and Alder Brook to provide direct access to Elementary School.
- 8 Upgrade of sidewalks from the green to an existing sidewalk on VT Route 15 commensurate with changes to the corner lot. Crosswalk improvements at the intersection.



VISION CONCEPT - TRANSPORTATION AND MOBILITY



CHAPTER 4 - PLANNING FOR PEOPLE - RECREATION AND OPEN SPACE IN THE ETC

Improving the experience for people within the ETC was something many felt strongly about during the public process. As noted in the 2012 Recreation Needs Assessment, the Town of Essex has many high quality recreational and park facilities in the area, and residents preferred to focus limited funds on maintaining existing facilities rather than acquiring or building new ones. However, residents expressed a strong desire for additional paths for bicycling and walking and, with a growing residential base in the ETC, these types of assets, as well as more urban open spaces like plazas, will likely be necessary.

RECREATION ASSETS

Essex has devoted considerable resources developing its recreation facilities and programs. Within the ETC is the **Mathieu Town Forest**, which includes a series of walking trails that connect to other neighborhoods along Sand Hill Road. This recreational asset has a narrow frontage along VT Route 15, but the primary trailhead is behind Sand Hill Park.

Sand Hill Park is located adjacent to the ETC, south of the intersection between VT Route 15 and Sand Hill Road. This community park includes a competitive outdoor pool and sprayground, a large picnic shelter, basketball hoops, a tennis court, four pickleball courts, and a playground.

North of the ETC is the 700-acre **Indian Brook Park**, which offers non-motorized boating on a 60-acre reservoir, hiking, nordic skiing, camping, and passive recreation. The park is contiguous to the Winooski Valley Park District lands, allowing trail connectivity to Colchester Pond. Indian Brook Road is connected to the ETC by an existing sidewalk with a signalized crossing at Old Stage Road. Sidewalks along Old Stage Road are relatively narrow (6 feet or less) and in varying states of repair.

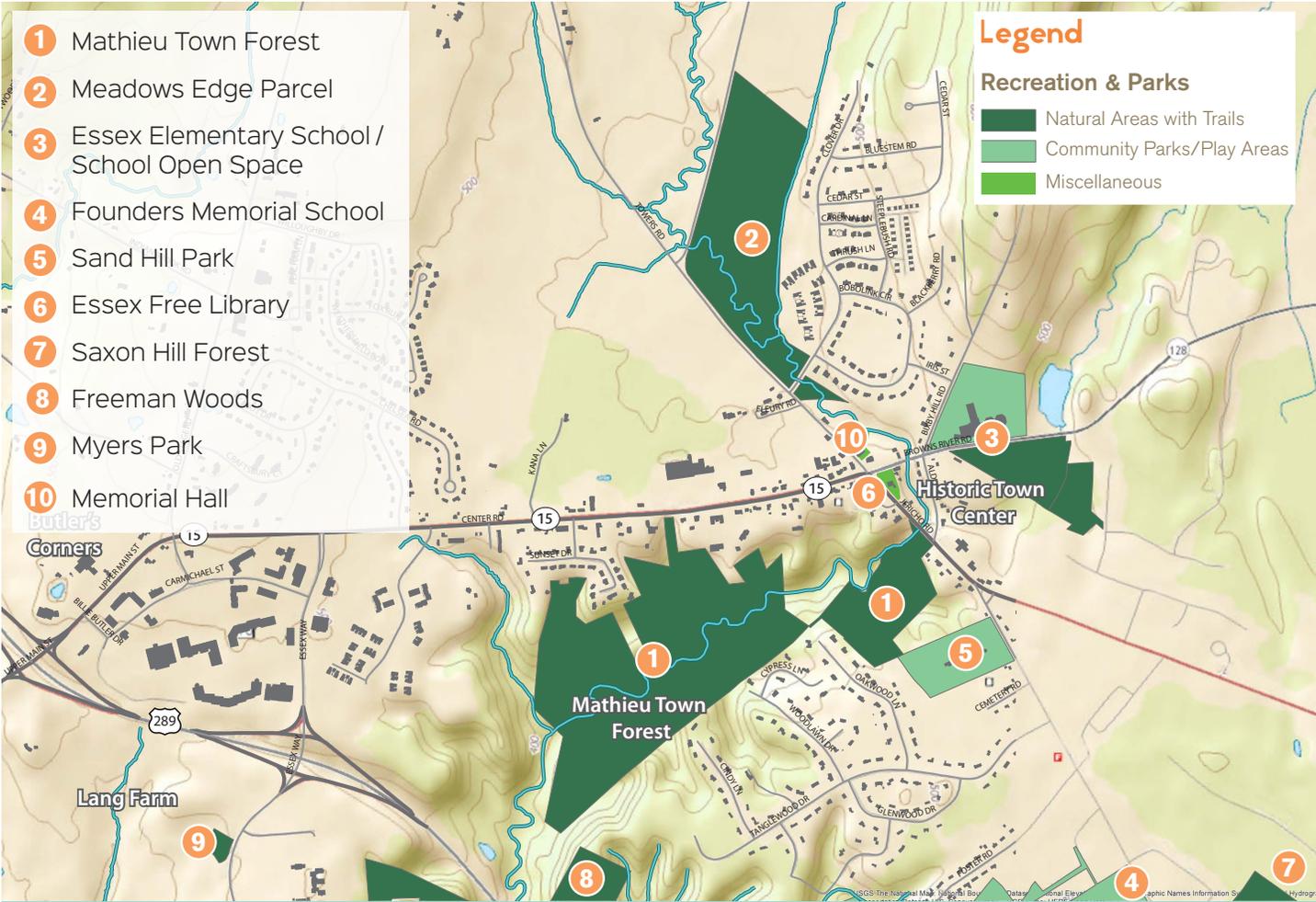
The ETC is also connected to the 250-acre **Saxon Hill Forest** and surrounding business district through a network of trails in the Mathieu Town Forest, Foster Road Park, and the Forestdale Heights neighborhood. Enhancing routes between these areas is a major goal in the Saxon Hill Forest Management Plan and would support economic development, recreation, and reduce vehicle travel along Route 15.



INDIAN BROOK PARK



SAND HILL PARK



RECREATIONAL ASSETS

The paved multi-use Essex Transportation Path (Essex Bike Path) has several segments within the ETC. It runs parallel to Essex Way from VT Route 289 (exit 10) to VT Route 15, then splits into two branches along VT Route 15: one ending at VT Route 289 (exit 9) and the other at the entrance to the Essex Square shopping center. There is also a short segment on the north side of VT Route 15 connecting to Craftsbury Court.

Just east of ETC is the Essex Elementary School (Near Bixby and Browns River Road) which has a playground. Adjacent to the school property is a walking path (Trowbridge Crossing) safely connecting neighborhoods to the Center. The Essex Free Library is also located off Browns River Road, near its intersection at VT Route 15. In addition to traditional library functions, this venue includes arts and cultural events for residents of all ages. The Essex Center Green is across the street and includes outdoor space for relaxation and reflection.

Not all the recreational assets in the ETC are publicly owned and maintained. For example:

- The central green at Essex Experience, which includes a bandstand and butterfly sculpture, is used for a summer food truck and concert series.
- The T-Rex Theater at the Essex Cinemas also is used for live performing arts.
- The Saybrook Condominiums include tennis courts, a pool, and walking paths available to its residents.
- The Old Stage Village neighborhood accessed off Willoughby Drive and Peacham Lane also enjoys the use of tennis courts, basketball courts, and a pool.
- There is a small “tot lot” behind the Whittier Building at 4 Carmichael Street.



SAYBROOK TENNIS COURTS



ESSEX EXPERIENCE BANDSTAND

CREATING FUNCTIONAL OPEN SPACE

The open spaces described in the vision concept are diverse; reflecting both the needs of residents and visitors to the ETC as well as responding to the anticipated built environments. Open spaces that serve multiple functions (i.e., stormwater treatment, civic gathering, trail access) should be encouraged.

Open space should not simply be the “leftover” spaces such as wetlands or riparian corridors. Those natural features must be avoided for purposes of development. Lands set aside for active and passive open space should complement approved forms within a neighborhood. As described the 2008 Open Space Plan, some types of open space make greater sense in more mixed-use settings. Parking areas, driveways, and other similar areas should be excluded from the land suitable for open space. To make the build-out of the ETC possible, requirements for open space may need to allow for “fee in lieu,” whereby developers can contribute financial resources to develop a site already designated or desired to be open space, although smaller, passive spaces should be incorporated into the development’s immediate landscape.



Policy Point: Site Design

Problem: Automobile-oriented design led to inefficient land use and sites that are difficult to redevelop.

Solution: Prioritize pedestrian access and experience in site design by using wide, safe sidewalks with direct routes to destinations, and by integrating civic space into buildings.

PUBLIC REALM

An important way of making open space in the ETC functional is to place some of it within the “Public Realm” - areas either within the public right-of-way, along connecting streetscapes, or on publicly accessible private land. Within the more intensively developed neighborhoods in the vision concept (i.e. Mixed-Use South Neighborhood), the emphasis should be on “Public Realm” open space. Elsewhere in the ETC, if non-residential uses are proposed, public realm provisions should apply to some degree. Certain types of open/ civic space (pocket parks, urban plazas) are better suited toward being in the public realm.

It is important to note that civic space need not and should not be exclusively publicly owned and maintained. The expanded green within the Essex Experience offers an example of how private property can support the types of spaces needed for cultural events like concerts and food truck stops. Open spaces also need not be completely open to the public; the pool and tennis court areas of the Saybrook condominium development provide important on-site amenities to residents that reduce the demand on similar services provided by the Town.

OPEN SPACES TO SUPPORT ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

Enabling Open Space that Serves People

As the ETC evolves, the establishment and presentation of future open spaces should assure that they align with expected neighborhood densities and uses and that the experience of people living in or visiting the ETC is maintained and enhanced. The following images reflect the types of functioning open spaces envisioned in the ETC. Each neighborhood might have a slightly varied “palette” of open space types and requirements for open space in the public realm.



CONCERT ON THE ESSEX EXPERIENCE GREEN



OUTDOOR DINING



COMMERCIAL STOREFRONTS (WHITTIER BUILDING)

OPEN SPACES TO SUPPORT RECREATION

Encouraging Recreation in the ETC

As outlined in the vision and from the community input, encouraging outdoor recreation that has both local (neighborhood) and destination appeal can help build upon the role of the ETC as an “entertainment” hub. Leveraging outdoor gathering spaces for farmers markets, concerts, and events can help invigorate nearby retail establishments, and recreation elements can be integrated into established parks and venues. The images below reflect some of the potential diversity of recreation within the ETC.

i **Policy Point: Recreation**

Problem: Essex has plenty of recreational assets, but few within or near the ETC and none that fit in an urban context.

Solution: Provide small recreational and open spaces within the ETC’s neighborhoods that strengthen businesses and provide solace for residents



GREENBELT



POCKET PARK



PLAZA



PLAYGROUND



NATURAL AREA/OPEN SPACE



PARK

TYPES OF OPEN/CIVIC SPACES

There are seven basic forms for open/civic space within the ETC that are essential to achieving the community's vision, though many other specific types of civic space are possible and encouraged (such as private pool areas in an apartment complex, outdoor seating for restaurants, community garden areas for cottage courts, etc.).



PLAZA, SQUARE or GREEN: These urban open spaces are related to surrounding architecture and generally include passive recreational elements (benches) as well as civic gathering and outdoor market space. Size is related to surrounding development patterns, but minimally are between 1/4 to 1/2 acre. These spaces generally serve the immediate context.



PARK: Park spaces come in several varieties, but all provide a combination of active and passive recreation, most often with a facility such as restrooms, picnic areas, etc. Parks may be neighborhood focused (3 to 10 acres) or community-focused (20+ acres), serving either a neighborhood (1/2 to 1 mile) or larger area (2 to 5 miles).



POCKET PARK: These smaller (generally 1/4 acre or less) spaces are typically included in a residential or mixed-use environment and are focused on passive recreational needs such as walking, reflection, etc. Typical design elements within a Pocket Park are benches, gazebos or fountains. Pocket parks typically do not have associated parking.



PLAYGROUND: Playgrounds generally include apparatus to appeal to children (5-15) and can often include associated field space for more active play. Passive recreation features in a playground include benches, etc. Generally, these open spaces are within walking distances (1/4 to 1/2-mile radius) of served populations.



GREENBELT / GREENWAY: Linear parks or green spaces, often associated with natural (e.g., rivers) or human-made (e.g., roadways) features, that serve to establish buffering between uses and often provide functional space for trails, public art, and civic gathering.



OPEN SPACE / NATURAL AREA: Natural areas generally preserve larger tracts of land that are either undeveloped or have limited development. Some improvements are often provided which are incidental to the enjoyment of the property such as trails. Improvements are usually located in one section on the property so that the area remains largely undeveloped. Parking areas, interpretive centers, and restrooms are sometimes provided.

VISION CONCEPT

Key Recreation and Open Space Improvements

Open or civic spaces within the ETC reflect the diversity of the mix of uses offered. In more developed areas, open spaces include pocket parks and plazas. In residential neighborhoods, open space and recreation provide resources that appeal to residents. Additional active recreation facilities support the entire ETC and potentially broader community. Key highlights are:

- 1 Continued greenbelt zone on the north side of VT Route 15 to provide outdoor space and multi-use trails. Pocket parks or green spaces enhance the character.
- 2 Larger-scale green in the Mixed-Use South Neighborhood to support events and function as a defining element within the neighborhood. Smaller-scale plazas and pocket parks enhance streetscape and function together as open space and outdoor recreation venues. Public art enhances identity.
- 3 Potential park or recreation area within common land and connected to the broader ETC via bike or multi-use path connection.
- 4 Neighborhood park/playground linked to a potential broader active park area and connected by a multi-use trail along the former railbed.
- 5 Lands adjacent to Mathieu Town Forest for active recreational fields that serve growing residential development within the ETC. Proximity to the existing bike path makes the area easily accessible.
- 6 New infill developments that include green spaces and greenways to enhance the sense-of-place.
- 7 Changes in development pattern to expand the visibility of the Historic Center cemetery.
- 8 Improved pedestrian links between the Library and existing historic green to enhance the function of the area as an outdoor gathering venue.



VISION CONCEPT - RECREATION AND OPEN/CIVIC SPACE



CHAPTER 5 - ESTABLISHING AN IDENTITY

As discussed elsewhere in this Master Plan, the ETC has two primary arrival points: one along VT Route 15 at Butlers Corners, at the intersection of Upper Main Street and VT 289 and the other at the Historic Center at Jericho Road and Center Road. Where the ETC sits in the larger landscape of Essex and surrounding communities is an important part of its identity and one that Essex seeks to preserve. Furthermore, a stronger sense of identity is realized by tangible elements, such as wayfinding, architecture and streetscape, combined with less tangible aspects of creating a “gateway” to the area and, most importantly, a sense of arrival.



EXISTING SIGNS IN THE ETC

ETC TODAY- LAND USE PATTERNS

The ETC today has a mixed record on reaching the vision in the 1991 Master Plan. VT Route 15 remains largely what it was, a two-line primary arterial with no real streetscape. While the underlying zoning has many attributes that make the development of “mixed” uses possible, the current standards for design as expressed in the Business Control Overlay District are not detailed nor do they reflect many of the more contemporary approaches for mixed-use commonly seen in urbanizing communities. The next iteration of design standards will address scale and proportions, use and application of materials and the integration of future buildings into the existing landscape and streetscape.

Existing development within the ETC, some completed under the auspices of planned unit developments and master plans, has often deviated dramatically from the pattern anticipated in the 1991 Master Plan. The orientation of newer structures has not reinforced a formal grid pattern, accommodation for bicycles and pedestrians are modest and architectural design has not aligned around any central principles or standards.

i

Policy Point: Establishing an Identity for the ETC

Problem: How does one define a sense of arrival or a sense of place?

Solution: Consider the elements that give a place a unique sense of identity, including gateways (to define boundaries) and the use of visual design motifs.

PRESERVING VIEWS

The Importance of Scenic Resources in the ETC

Essex has completed several scenic resource inventories addressing views from roadways. The 2011 Views to the Mountain: A Scenic Protection Manual and the 2008 Open Space Plan both placed high importance on long-range views and their contributions to the scenic qualities of the community.

Within the northern portions of the original ETC boundary (i.e., the “Golden Triangle”), views from Old Stage Road and Towers Road have been identified as important, with an emphasis on “preserving rural character.” Views along Old Stage Road, north of Indian Brook Road, are particularly stunning with a wide expanse of the Green Mountains defining the background.

Distant views of Mount Mansfield, Camel’s Hump, and the Bolton range are relevant to portions of the ETC. Along VT Route 15, from Old Stage Road to near the Price Chopper, views east have Mount Mansfield as a primary focal point. Existing setbacks along VT Route 15 have generally preserved these views. Even within the built environment of the ETC, periodic views of Mount Mansfield are observed.

Views along VT Route 15 are more directed towards Mount Mansfield while views along Essex Way (towards the Essex Experience) are largely aligned with Camels Hump.



SCENIC VIEWS IN THE ETC

UNIFYING THE ETC THROUGH DESIGN

Defining a Welcoming Arrival Point to the ETC

Establishing a gateway into the ETC can take a variety of forms, from simple signage to more complex architectural features. The images on these pages express the range of options that could be explored as the ETC evolves. If a portion of VT Route 15 is reconfigured as a boulevard, incorporating art or structures into the design might provide the right opportunity for a gateway element.



OVERHEAD BANNER SYSTEM AT INTERSECTION

The architecture and the site layout provide a more literal gateway. Commonwealth Avenue will be a tree-lined boulevard with buildings on either side whose form emphasizes commercial uses or multi-story buildings with ground floor commercial topped by residential uses. Increased density in the form of 3-5 story buildings help to achieve such objectives as mixed-use, mixed income housing. Buildings are constructed of high quality, durable materials, with pitched roofs or attractive cornices. The mass of these larger buildings is vertically articulated into blocks or sections to mitigate the massing and horizontally articulated, especially at grade, to further bring down the scale and to relate to the street or landscape. Building entrances are clearly marked, visible and accessible from the street. Parking lots are tucked behind buildings with minimal visual impact from the street, to the extent possible. Where visible, they are screened with shrubbery, sitting walls, etc. Design principles and guidelines will be governed by the design review criteria of the Essex Zoning regulations.

The structures frame a two-way road, with parking on both sides with pavers, stamped-brick patterns, and other road treatments that might be added for traffic calming or to emphasize a road or intersection. Generous sidewalks connect to each other and move people along the boulevard, allowing for ample circulation and pauses to look in a store window, greet a neighbor, or rest on a bench, an element of street furniture (see below) that visually unifies the street. An iconic sculpture or banners may one day identify that one has arrived at the ETC.

Establishing Streetscape Improvements that Define and Unify

Streetscape elements in the ETC such as lighting, paving patterns, banner systems, and street furniture can be used to help establish a visual reference for the ETC that helps unify it. Elements from the “Vermont Green Streets Guide”, including rain gardens doing double-duty as landscaping, may be implemented along the road. Uniform lampposts and street furniture – benches, bus shelters, etc. – line the street. While recognizing that an overall theme may vary within each neighborhood, finding common design elements that are present in all neighborhoods can provide a touchstone and improve the sense of place.

Finding a common visual motif is often an important part of developing an effective identity system. A motif can help reinforce the community brand, promote a sense of visual cohesion, and evoke important community attributes. Often an “identifiable community asset,” such as an iconic building or structure in the town that is easily recognizable, provides that motif. For the ETC, given the diversity of the neighborhoods, finding one example of architecture that evokes the overall sense of place might be challenging.



The regional landform, the shape of the mountains, the arc of the river can act as a touchstone to a visual motif, grounding it in its “place.” The tremendous views of Mount Mansfield as viewed from VT Route 15, the meandering of Alder Brook, the curve of VT Route 15 or the crossroads at Butlers and Four Corners, are good candidates to ground the ETC’s visual identity to this place.

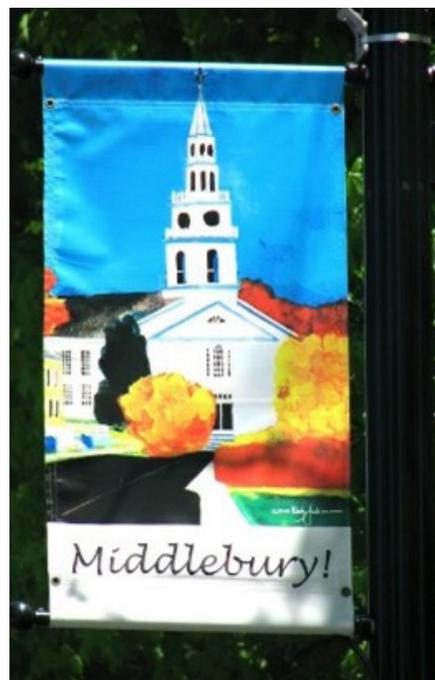
It is also very important to make the visual identity of a place unique. What is it about the ETC that is “special” and can be used to differentiate the visual motifs? Perhaps it is the color of the mountains at certain times of day or year, or the changing backdrop in fall, or the community interacting with the landscape. Exploring these questions is an important community effort.

GATEWAYS AND ARRIVAL IN THE ETC

Wayfinding and Signage

A well-conceived gateway and wayfinding system is supported by a hierarchy of signs that address all forms of mobility and visitor arrival experiences. Signage that addresses a variety of modes and communicates important navigational information can add tremendously to the character of a place.

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) provides standards (Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices or MUTCD) for signs, markings, and signals for all classifications of roadways, including class 1 highways. A primary objective of MUTCD is to enhance safety. While greater flexibility could be realized through a reclassification of VT Route 15 from a class 1 state highway to a class 1 town highway, the MUTCD standards are important to consider in all signage design. Reclassification of VT Route 15 will be discussed in Chapter 6.



The various neighborhoods in the ETC might have a slightly different visual expression of identity. In the Historic Center, for example, the appropriate signage might have a more traditional appearance. In the Mixed-Use neighborhoods, the form and appearance might be more contemporary. Logos, fonts or colors can be used to bridge these differences; allowing various parts of the ETC to “brand” themselves in ways that are consistent with their planned evolution, but also link the parts together.

Wayfinding is not the same as signage. The ETC has many signs that help direct people (or more often cars) to important destinations. Signage can help convey information (where, how far, what) and can help visually reinforce a community’s identity. Wayfinding, on the other hand, is a broader term that brings together signage with other elements (streetscape, key architecture, landmarks, etc.) to help users gain a stronger sense of where they are and how they can move around. Wayfinding is a “system” not a sign.

The design of new streets, plazas, and other spaces can reflect the unique vision for each of the neighborhoods of the ETC, while allowing elements like signage, lighting, and planting design to act as unifying elements.



GATEWAY ELEMENT INTEGRATED INTO ARCHITECTURE



UNIQUE PUBLIC ART TO DEFINE PEDESTRIAN SPACE

VISION CONCEPT

Key Gateways and Identity Opportunities

Creating a welcoming arrival into the ETC may include a variety of improvements designed to both establish a visual identity for the area and dovetail with the expected land development patterns. The vision concept identifies a series of recommendations intended to help promote arrival and place-making.

- 1** New gateway feature at Billie Butler / VT Route 15 to introduce “ETC” and integrate with proposed boulevard concept. Vertical elements and public art might enhance the arrival experience. This is a good location to start the “ETC Mixed-Use” identity.
- 2** Secondary gateway node at Old Stage Road to enhance the sense of arrival into the ETC Mixed-Use neighborhood and create a visual reference for a crosswalk.
- 3** Secondary gateway at VT 289 interchange to communicate arrival to ETC. Wayfinding on the bike path can help identify nearby retail areas, restaurants, and attractions.
- 4** Improved visual elements at Essex Way to reinforce arrival into Mixed-Use South neighborhood. Wayfinding to identify retail and commercial uses and access to parks.
- 5** New streetlights along VT Route 15 in this zone could help tie together Mixed-Use and Historic Neighborhoods. This segment of VT Route 15 is where the roadside appearance transitions from the “Greenbelt” form to a more “traditional” form.
- 6** Improvements along the streetscape include unified lighting and street furniture. Wayfinding in this area functions to identify historic and civic resources (Library, Memorial Hall, School). Potential additional gateway element for VT Route 128 arrival.
- 7** Primary gateway feature to act as a counterpart with #1 above and to acknowledge the “historic center” area.



VISION CONCEPT - GATEWAYS AND ARRIVAL TO THE ETC



CHAPTER 6 - NEXT STEPS

The vision expressed in this master plan can only be reached through a combination of efforts. Throughout this process, many in the community expressed a strong desire to elevate the quality and appearance of development within the ETC. Regulations alone, however, often do little to revitalize a place. A combination of incentives and investments, coupled with a strong vision and supportive regulations, is often the best approach to helping a community evolve.

It is a goal for this master plan to find the right set of tools to support the vision. Several key recommendations are provided to help guide the next steps of the ETC.

Recommendation #1: Addressing Infrastructure

A recurring issue discussed with the community and through the work of the Steering Committee was the importance of the Town guiding the development of infrastructure and supporting the evolution of the ETC through public investments.

The Town must remain cautious as it considers potential investments in the ETC. What, where and how much are all questions that need careful analysis and thoughtful consideration. The scope and scale of this master plan does not drill down into the specific analysis needed to answer all these questions, but several categories of public investment have been discussed and should be considered as part of long-term planning for the ETC:

WATER – The issues around the availability of water to support the evolution of the ETC are primarily focused on a lack of static water pressure versus a lack of capacity, which is generally sufficient. According to the 2016 Essex Town Plan, the static pressure near Butler's Corners was relatively low (43 psi). Anecdotal inputs from the public and members of the Steering Committee suggest that the net impact of this has been the need for developers to install equipment to increase the pressure for individual buildings. The problem is particularly acute for the development of taller buildings. As the vision for the ETC affords some significant increases in density and associated vertical development, addressing this lack of water pressure will be critical.

The Public Works Department has examined the issue of water availability and pressure within the ETC. Working with the Champlain Water District (CWD), the Public Works Department identified a potential new interconnection and upgrade of a 6-inch main to a 12-inch main along VT Route 15 between Billie Butler Drive and Essex Way. After review and approval by the CWD Board, this project and another in Colchester were funded by a voter-approved \$3.5 million bond in 2020. A memorandum describing details of this project can be found in Appendix C.

This upgrade provides one side of the equation (total flow) to enable taller buildings in the ETC, but static pressure is still a challenge. Public Works also explored the idea of over-pressurizing the water distribution system in the ETC to address this, but ultimately decided that the equipment needed to support this this would be more costly to the Town and users in the pressurized zone than individual building pumps.

SEWER – According to the 2016 Essex Town Plan, the current capacity of the Essex wastewater disposal system is 3.1M gallons per day (gpd), with the Town’s portion of the capacity at 1.1M gpd. According to the Town Plan and based on 2015 data, of this 1.1M gpd about 122,600 gpd has been allocated to as-yet unbuilt developments. An additional 367,000 gpd has been assigned to individual parcels within the sewer core. The resulting unallocated capacity is about 130,000 gpd or approximately 12% of total capacity.

The Town Plan summary correctly points out that the full buildout of the Town is not likely to happen quickly. The same is likely for the ETC; development will happen at a pace consistent with the real estate market and will be influenced by a multitude of local, regional and national issues and trends. From the public process and through the inputs of the Steering Committee, there was general concurrence about using sewer allocations as key to supporting future growth within the ETC. Additionally, revising the sewer core boundary to align with any updated zoning districts that reflect the neighborhoods within the ETC master plan should be undertaken. Such alignment, even in the absence of any reallocation process, helps align priorities between land use and sewer policy in areas where density should be maximized.

Through a recent sewer capacity study, the Public Works Department has identified the need for an additional 235 EUs (Equivalent Units) of sewer capacity, which represents approximately 47,000 gpd, to address the projected buildout of the ETC beyond what is currently allocated today. Combined with the 8,370 gpd of capacity needed for buildout elsewhere in the sewer core, this exceeds the Town’s total capacity by 55,370 gpd. The Public Works Department has identified that potential density reductions or reallocation of underutilized sewer capacity from other properties in the sewer core might be needed. While very uncertain, another long-term option might be the development of additional sewer capacity, either by the Town or through agreements with other entities. Public Works has also begun to evaluate potential system upgrades to maintain appropriate design flows for the ETC and developed some anticipated costs and potential cost-sharing mechanisms. Memoranda outlining current thinking on sewer issues can be found in Appendix C.

As the buildout of the ETC is expected to be slow, particularly given that much of the potential density exists within areas where redevelopment is necessary, the Town has time to consider options for addressing sewer needs and their costs and benefit. Regardless of whether increased density results from changes to the underlying zoning within the ETC, some of the existing sewer capacity challenges will continue. Ultimately, the Selectboard has the ability to reallocate wastewater towards areas where it is deemed most important and continued analysis of how best to allocate capacity to achieve Town goals will be important to inform such decisions.

STORMWATER – The level of anticipated development within the ETC will require additional analysis and evaluation of appropriate stormwater management options. As the Town of Essex currently does not have a central stormwater system nor a stormwater utility, much of the work for stormwater treatment falls on the site plan/development process.

The Town is subject to the State MS4 NPDES Phase 2 permit, an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requirement to prevent pollution from urban stormwater. A portion of the ETC is located within the MS4 boundary and within the Indian Brook Watershed, one of two within the Town that is currently listed on EPA's 303(d) List of Impaired Waterways. Under the MS4 permit, the Town developed a Flow Restoration Plan (FRP) detailing how the Town will reduce the amount of stormwater entering the stream in an effort to mitigate the high flow. Because of this Plan and upcoming phosphorus control requirements, the Town has started to focus on underground storage and infiltration practices to manage stormwater. Development within the Indian Brook portion of the ETC will be encouraged to explore storage/infiltration options and will need to achieve a net zero increase in stormwater runoff post-development.

A significant component of the 2018 MS4 permit is achieving phosphorus reduction targets identified under the Lake Champlain Phosphorus Total Maximum Daily Load Implementation Plan. The Town is required to implement long-term solutions towards reducing phosphorus in Lake Champlain from developed lands by approximately 25% through Phosphorus Control Plans (PCPs). While the Town is in the process of developing a PCP in conjunction with the Village of Essex Junction, it is anticipated that the Town will meet these reduction requirements through retrofitting various systems and incorporating stringent standards for new development and re-development in Town Zoning and Subdivision Regulations and Public Works Standards.

While not currently a regulatory requirement, the Town anticipates that chloride will become regulated under the MS4 permit in the future. Since 2015, the Town has conducted an ongoing chloride monitoring study to better understand the chloride levels in streams. This study indicated that a few streams have the potential to be deemed as impaired. Hot spots from this study indicate that most of the salt impairment comes from areas of large impervious surfaces such as parking lots and sidewalks. The only way to address chloride is to reduce and modify salt application practices. It will be imperative for the Town to work with private land developers to understand how salt application practices can be improved while maintaining a level of safety for residents.

The ETC vision contemplates the inclusion of low-impact development (LID) techniques such as rain gardens and bio-swales along and within new development areas to lessen the burden on traditional systems. With the increase in impervious surface, it will be important for the Town and private land developers to work together to come up with innovative solutions to address stormwater flow and phosphorus reduction targets during the review process. More neighborhood-scaled plans for gravel wetlands and infiltration basins are being implemented to look at how combined solutions could help improve the efficiency of development and lessen the burden on landowners. Implementing creative solutions, such as pocket parks with rain gardens and other stormwater features, will enhance the vitality and promote the goals and aesthetic of the ETC.

SIDEWALKS AND PATHS – The Town of Essex has been working to improve the pedestrian environment within the ETC. Projects for sidewalks along the north side of Route 15 have recently been completed, and the most current (2018) Public Works project list includes several projects that directly support the vision for the ETC.

Towers Road Sidewalk- VT128 to Clover Drive: This segment, which had a \$216,000 budget, was completed in September 2019. This connection is shown as #8 on the Vision: Transportation and Mobility Plan, see Chapter 3.

Alternative Project VT15- Sidewalk: This project, which has funding approved for a scoping study by VTrans, would create a new sidewalk on the north side of Route 15 from Old Stage Road to Essex Way. This segment is shown as #4 on the Vision: Transportation and Mobility Plan, see Chapter 3.

Price Chopper to RT 128/RT15: An as-yet unfunded project, the Town has identified this as a priority in its recent analysis of top 10 sidewalk projects. This segment is shown graphically on the Vision: Transportation and Mobility Plan, see Chapter 3.

VT-15 Path from Athens Drive to VT-289: A scoping study in 2018 explored a more direct off-road bicycle and pedestrian connection from the Village of Essex Junction to the Town Center (already used informally). The study recommended an 8-foot-wide path, possibly with additional lighting, along the south/east side of Main Street and Upper Main Street.

Beyond these projects, the Town has recently examined its sidewalk impact fees and the implications of updating them. The recommendation from a report presented to the Public Works department is to adjust the fees to provide additional resources to the community for the development of new walks. The thoughtful application of those fees into the ETC can support greater mobility and connectedness as expressed in this plan.

PARKS/OPEN SPACE – A key focus of the vision for the ETC is on supporting new mixed-use and residential development through a diverse range of open space and recreational amenities. As described in Chapter 4, the idea that functional open space/parks do not necessarily have to be “public” is important and something the Town should continue to explore. Cost-sharing for the development of public realm improvements, including parks and open spaces, might be a suitable option as might a “fee in lieu” provision through which open space requirements are paid for by developer fees to the town. Such provisions would typically only apply to required on-site improvements vs. paying for off-site improvements necessitated by the development. For any such improvements, agreements are required to assure for public access and use of private open space.

Beyond studying the mechanics of how to control or develop parks/open spaces, the Town should also consider its priorities for parks and recreational infrastructure within the ETC. Evaluating lands within the ETC that are the most suitable locations for public parks, recreational fields, and other facilities should be part of the parks and recreational planning process. If appropriate, either through the dedication of developer open space or the acquisition of specific lands, the Town could gain control over specific parcels that are identified as being important to the evolving ETC as well as potentially addressing existing and established parks and recreational needs.

PARKING – Within the Mixed-Use North and Mixed-Use South neighborhoods, the anticipated densities and scale of development will increase the parking demand, which may well exceed the quantity that can be provided or would be desired as surface parking. The Town may wish to consider direct investment in structured parking within the Mixed-Use neighborhood with the expressed purpose of supporting and facilitating new residential and commercial growth. Provisions to make parking and transit improvements primary allowable uses can help support potential investments. Any investment does not need to be at the sole contribution of the Town. Public-private partnerships are often undertaken to align a developer’s need for nearby parking with public objectives for economic development or public access to parking. Recent examples of such partnerships include Montpelier and St. Albans’ new municipal parking garages.

ACTION ITEMS:

Key next steps in exploring how critical infrastructure improvements might help realize the vision are:

1. Evaluate changes in development policy to require shared parking within parts of the ETC.
2. Review future land development plans for the ETC to find options for municipal parking.
3. Review existing standard road sections to address needs for on-street parking provisions as well as the incorporation of bike lanes, sidewalks, and other streetscape improvements (street trees, lighting, etc.).
4. Study options for potential water pressure upgrades within the ETC, and determine what technical improvements or modifications need to be made to increase overall pressure.
5. Work with private landowners in the ETC to evaluate options for increasing fire flow rates. Establish performance standards for new development if private-sector pressure improvements are required.
6. Continue to evaluate current sewer allocations in the Town and the potential reacquisition of unallocated capacity to prioritize growth within the ETC.
7. Update sewer ordinance to reflect the results of the capacity analysis and reallocation.
8. Consider the ETC vision when evaluating new pedestrian improvements or updating the Capital Improvement Plans.
9. Consider the open/civic space provisions of the ETC vision, and evaluate where neighborhood and town-wide recreational needs might be met.

Recommendation #2: Addressing Design along VT Route 15

As a State Highway, VT Route 15 (Center Road) serves both as a critical connecting link between the ETC land north and south of the highway and as the major arterial east-west route from the northeastern part of Vermont into Chittenden County. The road contributes a substantial volume of traffic during peak hours of travel which creates the opportunity for access to commercial and business development. It also acts as a divider between the ETC lands north and south of the road, creating difficult cross-property access for pedestrians and vehicles. The critical design issue from a planning perspective is how to balance the need for effective through-put of peak hour traffic while providing the needed cross-road access for safe and effective movement of people and commerce between the two major land segments in the ETC Plan.

Contributing to the issue are the design limitations placed on State roads by VTRANS within their right of way limits. While VTRANS has been a good partner to the Town and maintains the roadway in high quality, some of the usual transportation tools available to bridge the gap between needed through-put of traffic and cross-road access may not be viable options under VTRANS policies and practices. In addition, the high volume of traffic must be accommodated, and some tools may not be applicable, whether the road is controlled by VTRANS or not.

With this dilemma, there are two potential approaches which are not necessarily alternatives, but they are more in line with a set of design options that can be utilized first within the context of the State highway design requirements and as additional options that may be available if there were no State highway design restrictions.

APPROACH:

1. Initiate the process of including road and adjacent land features within the ETC area to create a reduced speed zone between Essex Way and the eastern access to the Circumferential Highway and use design features to identify this specific section of roadway as a separate and distinguishable Town Center area. This will involve the installation of many design features within and adjacent to the road right of way without changing the classification of the road. These might include -- but not necessarily be limited to -- such items/approaches as the following:

- a. Address Speed. Through the Unified Work Program of the CCRPC, conduct a speed limit study for this section of VT15 (and possibly further to the east outside this area along VT15) aimed at reducing the speed limit to accommodate cross-lot pedestrian and vehicle traffic.

b. Redesign the three critical intersections: VT15 at Billie Butler Drive, VT15 at the Old Stage/Commonwealth intersection and the VT15/ Essex Way intersection to provide for safer and more efficient pedestrian access. This may involve installation of crossing medians at the intersections as safe refuge for crossing pedestrians.

c. Strategic Use of Curbing. A portion of VT15 in the ETC area has curbing (north side of the road west of Old Stage Village. Extend this curbing throughout this zone to better define and channel traffic. Visually, this creates a narrower travelled space as opposed to open grass and swales. Design storm water collection and adjacent storage/ treatment into the concept to meet stormwater regulations using infiltration to the maximum extent possible.

d. Landscape Improvements. Replicate on the north side of VT15 the linear park theme evident on the south side of VT15, while also providing improvements to the linear park on the south side. Improvements could include:

- New pole-mounted decorative lighting, similar to the lighting along Pearl St. in the Village and Carmichael St. in the Town. The lighting poles should be designed with flag supports, for flags or banners that can be changed seasonally. The lights should be equipped with receptacles for seasonal lighting such as summer white lights and winter holiday lights.
- Provide a ten-foot wide meandering path on the north side, with extensive shrubs and trees planted in a way that doesn't interfere with road visibility. The tree species should be chosen to provide a future large canopy cover that creates a visual differentiation along the section of roadway.
- Utilize visually eye-catching displays at the eastern and western end of the approach to the section to identify it as being different than elsewhere along VT-15, for example statuary or some other form of colorful/unique artwork or installation.

2. If it is determined after completion of the first phase approach that additional measures are needed to provide increased local control over the roadway design, then consideration should be given to changing the road classification from a State Highway to a Class 1 road. There are pros and cons to this approach and further studies are warranted if this approach is to be considered.

a. The pros include, but may not be limited to, the following:

- Local control of the roadway design so that pedestrian safety features such as bump-outs that are not currently allowed on State highways can be installed
- Speed limits set by the municipality and not by VTRANS
- Full medians could be constructed along the length of the Class 1 section

b. The cons include, but may not be limited to, the following:

- VTRANS is not likely to allow a short segment of State Highway to be classified as a Class 1 roadway. The Village Class 1 highway ends at the western edge of the Town line. VTRANS has indicated that they would not want a gap in the Class 1 coverage so that their winter maintenance is not “gapped” for a short section between two Class 1 segments. Therefore, the area to be converted to a Class 1 Town Highway would be more extensive than only in a short segment. This greatly changes responsibility and costs.
- The Town would pick up increased road maintenance costs to include responsibility for at least five to seven major traffic signal installations and possibly more, costs for future stormwater improvements and upgrades to meet permit requirements, delays in preventative pavement overlays and reconstruction requiring local costs to fix, additional equipment and personnel costs to cover increases in plow responsibility on a major, regional arterial roadway. Estimates provide by VTRANS to obtain Town concurrence are generally considered to be the low end of costs and are not location specific.

3. This two-phased approach lays out the general framework to address design changes along VT-15 and provides guidance and expectations regarding the requirements for redevelopment of existing parcels or new project development. Infrastructure improvements along and within the corridor such as curbing along VT15, installation of street lights, dedication of open land, installation of a multi-use path and addition of landscaping features are all elements of the design that can be included in development approvals that will enhance the investment and the ETC.

ACTION ITEMS:

- 1. Work with VTrans, CCMPO, and regional partners to study the traffic impacts of the evolving ETC. Consider the findings and recommendations from the recent VT Route 15 Corridor Study and consider how increased residential development in the ETC might impact multi-modal traffic flow.**
- 2. The vision outlined in this master plan includes many elements (Bulb-outs at key crossing points, street trees and new lighting, etc.) which may rely on the community controlling some portion of the VT Route 15 corridor. The scenario modeled above provides the potential cost implications of such a move. A more detailed review of the scenario and consultation with the VTrans district office would be an appropriate next step.**
- 3. The Town of Essex Public Works Department has raised concerns about the development of VT Route 15. These concerns are important and reflect issues around costs, impact on plowing, circulation, and pedestrian access. The Town should continue to study this opportunity.**

Recommendation #3: Advancing the Plan

The Town of Essex currently has separately adopted zoning and subdivision regulations that are administered by the Town’s Zoning Administrator (administrative permits) and Planning Commission (subdivision, site plan, planned unit development, and design reviews), with staff support. The Board of Adjustment reviews conditional use applications, appeals and variance requests, typically for projects that also require Planning Commission review.

Current zoning districts within the study area are generally consistent with the 1990 Master Plan for the Essex Town Center, which anticipated large scale, master-planned, predominantly green-field (new or vacant land) development in association with the completion of the Circumferential Highway. Conventional zoning districts that regulate allowed uses and densities of development have been supplemented by forms of planned unit development that allow for more concentrated, mixed-use, master-planned development. Design standards also apply to certain types of development under separate design review and scenic overlay districts.

In developing ETC | Next, a review of the existing zoning structure was completed as were options for updating the current development regulations to achieve the vision. Revisions to the zoning code should emphasize considerations articulated in this current ETC Next Plan, allowances for additional administrative review capacity, and “place-making” through good design. As rezoning is considered for the ETC, a more detailed evaluation of uses is expected.

ACTION ITEMS:

The following regulatory strategies are recommended for further consideration:

- 1. Explore “hybrid” regulations that incorporate the design elements of a form-based code within a set of updated – and potentially integrated or unified – zoning and subdivision regulations.**
- 2. Allow for expanded administrative review for smaller infill projects and minor modifications**
- 3. For larger, phased projects, retain a more deliberative review process by a single review board that allows for community input. Encourage PUD for this type of development.**
- 4. Revise and update existing zoning districts to conform to ETC Master Plan neighborhoods.**
- 5. Considering categorizing allowed uses by general types (residential, nonresidential, civic, etc.) rather than overly-specific uses (single-family dwelling, small production and sales, etc.).**

6. Re-evaluate standards such as setbacks, height, frontage, and coverage to allow for better development.
7. Provide clearer standards for building height and massing to achieve a human scale of development and consideration for scenic views.
8. Institute connectivity, street grid and block standards to achieve walkable pedestrian- and transit-friendly patterns and densities of development as specified for each district.
9. Update historic district and design review standards to incorporate recommended development types and associated design considerations presented in the Design Report, including iconic historic and modern architectural forms.
10. Review and update related existing zoning and subdivision regulations for consistency with recommended ETC standards where appropriate

Essex Town Center Master Plan: Proposed Neighborhood Rezoning Options

	Current Regulations	Form Based Code	Hybrid
Permitting Process	<p>ZA – Permitted Uses PC – Subdivision, Site Plan, PUD, Design, WW Allocations ZBA – Conditional Use, Variances</p> <p>Note: Primarily a deliberative, negotiated review process requiring at least one public hearing; PC and ZBA review may be required for some types of development. PUD review allows for flexibility. Other reviews required (public works, etc.)</p>	<p>ZA/Staff –Admin Review PC – Subdivision, WW Allocations, Regulating/ Master Plan Review ZBA – Waivers, Variances</p> <p>Note: Intended to be prescriptive, expedited process that relies primarily on staff/admin review. Flexible only within established parameters. Other reviews required (e.g., public works, stormwater etc.)</p>	<p>Consider DRB (one review body). Allow for concurrent or consolidated reviews. Allow for administrative site plan review; limit conditional uses. Require staff, neighborhood meetings in advance of formal application Clarify/update master plan, PUD requirements</p>
Zoning Districts	Rezone/Modify Zoning Districts (Tables/Purpose, Zoning Map)	Rezone/Transect Zones (Tables/Purpose, Zoning Map)	Consider T-Zone standards under modified zoning districts
Dimensional Standards	Update tables (minimums, maximums)	Building Siting Building Forms/Envelopes	Consider T-Zone standards under modified zoning districts
Uses	Update tables (permitted, conditional use)	Building Functions	Limit number of conditional uses Define use types/forms (e.g., civic, housing)
Density	Update tables (minimums, maximums) Consider minimum densities	Typically defined by block, building dimensions; may also be defined by T-Zone	Update district tables to incorporate additional density measures, incentives where appropriate
Form/Design	Update zoning district tables (supplemental standards), design review standards and public works standards to incorporate proposed neighborhood design standards Also update site plan, parking, landscaping, sign standards/sections	Building Forms/Envelopes Typologies (Civic Spaces, etc.)— Define to incorporate or be consistent with proposed neighborhood design standards Add parking, landscaping, lighting, sign standards by T-Zone	Incorporate proposed neighborhood design standards in FBC-type tables/graphics by zoning district in updated design and public works standards Also update site plan, parking, landscaping, sign standards/sections



Implementation Table

Category	Key Next Step	Timeframe			Responsibility
		Short	Medium	Long	
Advancing the Plan	1. Amend the 2016 Essex Town Plan to incorporate the final ETC Next Master Plan, by reference or as an addendum, as the policy and design basis for associated bylaw amendments – and consideration in state Act 250 review and applications for state designation. Plan amendments can be presented for public hearing and adoption concurrently with associated bylaw amendments.	✓			Planning Staff and Planning Commission
	2. Update plan maps used in development review to show proposed public improvements (e.g., rec path and street networks) presented in the ETC Next Master Plan. Consider the adoption of an “official map” (under 24 V.S.A. § 4421) for use in development review, as also supported by the town’s capital improvement program, that depicts the general location of planned public rights-of-way (streets, recreation paths), open spaces (parks, plazas), and facilities (buildings, parking areas, structures) within the ETC.	✓			Planning Staff and Planning Commission
	3. Study and consider applying for state designations in relation to associated eligibility requirements and available benefits – e.g., for Village Centers (historic town center), New Town Center (mixed-use districts), and associated Neighborhood Development Areas – with consideration given to existing Essex Junction program designations.		✓		Planning Staff and Planning Commission
	4. Finalize the associated Design Report for this Plan and move forward with code changes for the ETC. The updated code should address all aspects of the Design Report including site layout, parking, uses, forms, and public realm requirements. Work collaboratively with the Planning Commission to review/finalize documents and seek adoption by the Town Selectboard.	✓	✓		Planning Staff and Planning Commission

Addressing Infrastructure

Category	Key Next Step	Timeframe			Responsibility
		Short	Medium	Long	
Addressing Infrastructure	5. Explore a variety of options for the financing of infrastructure improvements and public amenities, including but not limited to user fees, impact fees, grants, dedications, special assessments, a municipal tax increment financing district, ted cost-sharing agreements, and municipal bonding.		✓	✓	Planning Staff and Public Works
	6. Review and update current wastewater, stormwater management, impact fee and public works standards as needed to support ETC Master Plan recommendations – including targeted land use allocations, development densities, lot coverage requirements, street cross-sections, and associated infrastructure improvements.		✓	✓	Planning Staff and Public Works
	7. Study the implications of and update provisions for establishing infrastructure agreements under the public works standards. Such provisions should address how required development agreements established through a subdivision or master plan process consider the timing, installation and financing (public or private) of either required or desired infrastructure improvements, civic spaces, and other public or shared amenities.		✓	✓	Planning Staff and Public Works
	8. Revise the mapped “Sewer Core” (sewer service area) to coincide with ETC districts proposed for higher density development. Study the implications of reallocating wastewater capacity, under the current wastewater allocation ordinances, to support planned densities of development within the ETC (see recommendation #2, above).		✓	✓	Planning Staff and Public Works

Addressing Design on VT Route 15

Category	Key Next Step	Timeframe			Responsibility
		Short	Medium	Long	
	9. Work with VTrans and CCMPO on a future traffic study to consider the potential implications of increased density within the ETC. Bring the results of this analysis into consideration of changes to public works standards and consultation with VTrans on site access, identity, and mobility considerations along VT Route 15.		✓		Planning Staff and Public Works
	10. Complete an analysis and study of gateway/arrival elements within the ETC to address specific wayfinding features and potential pedestrian improvements. Evaluate needs for infrastructure in support of the ETC next vision as it relates to sidewalks, crosswalks, lighting, and local utilities.		✓		Planning Staff and Public Works
	11. Evaluate options along VT Route 15 to advance the ETC vision. Contact VTrans and address the potential for in reclassification of the route as a Class 1 Town Highway relative to identified concerns and established state policies. Review the goals and objectives of the Plan with VTrans to discuss other options as needed.			✓	Planning Staff and Public Works

THANKS!

The development of a plan such as this takes a considerable amount of effort.

Steering Committee

At the beginning of the Master Plan update process, the Town of Essex Selectboard sought and ultimately accepted the nomination of a number of town residents to act as a Steering Committee for the project. Through a number of working sessions, the Steering Committee provided valuable input and perspective that helped shape the Master Plan.

Steering Committee members were:

- John Alden
- Paula Duke
- Sally Fleury
- Christine Hammer
- Barbara Higgins
- Paul O’Leary
- Justin St. James
- Andy Suntup
- Brian Waxler
- Ned Daly

Planning Commission

At key points through the process of this Master Plan Update, the Town of Essex Planning Commission was engaged and provided important insights to the work. Several participated actively with the Steering Committee. The Planning Commission is expecting to move forward through the recommendations in Chapter 6.

Planning Commission members were:

- Dustin Brusco, Chair
- Dave Raphael
- Ned Daly
- John Alden
- John Mangan
- Jonathan Schumacher
- Joshua Knox
- Tom Furland

Town Staff

Staff from the Town of Essex were critical partners in the formation of this Master Plan.

- Owiso Makuku, Current Director of Community Development
- Dana Hanley, Former Director of Community Development
- Sharon Kelley, Zoning Administrator
- Darren Schibler, Community Development Planner
- Owiso Makuku, Community Development Director
- Dennis Lutz, Director of Public Works
- Ally Vile, Director of Parks and Recreation

Consulting Team

The following consulting team members contributed to the development of the plan.

- Mark Kane, Director of Community Planning and Design, SE Group
- Sharron Murray, FAICP, Principal, Frontporch Community Planning and Design
- Jason Hoover, Senior Associate, SE Group
- Michael Minadao, Senior Associate, Wiemann-Lampshire Architects
- Gabby Voeller, AICP, Associate, SE Group
- Patrick Olstad, PLA, LEED-AP, Associate, SE Group
- Drew Pollak-Bruce, Associate, SE Group
- Liz Grades, Graphic Artist, SE Group
- Beau Doucette, Landscape Design, SE Group
- Ellie Wachtel, Staff Planner, SE Group
- Ayden Eickhoff, Staff Planner, SE Group



Front Porch
Community Planning & Design
Sharon Murray, AICP





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