



August 2019 Essex Resident Listening Sessions Findings

August 22, 2019





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Executive Summary





Research Objectives

Gather resident feedback on proposed municipal governance and representation options, including potential issues, perceived benefits, and recommended improvements to each option

Determine whether revisions should be made to any of the options before gathering additional feedback

Use feedback to inform the development of a survey that will be deployed to residents



Research Methodology

Prior to the Listening Sessions: Screening Survey with Essex Residents

Prospective Listening Session participants were required to complete a short screening survey in order to qualify them for the group discussions – past Selectboard/Board of Trustees members and those not comfortable with audio recordings of the groups were screened out

We captured demographic/geographic information in order to get a good mix of respondents, including half from the Village and half from the Town outside the Village (TOV)

Of 146 responses to the screener, 87 were complete and qualified responses

KSV selected and confirmed 58 participants based on respondent availability while achieving balance in the groups between geographies, voting districts, and demographics

The screening survey was in field from July 22 – August 10



Research Methodology

Listening Sessions

51 residents of Essex participated in focus group-style Listening Sessions

There were six groups total:

- (2) An even mix of Village/Town outside the Village residents
- (2) Village residents only
- (2) Town outside the Village residents only, with a mix from the 8-1 and 8-3 voting districts

KSV moderated each 90-minute session – there were no Town of Essex nor Village of Essex Junction government officials present during the discussions

The Listening Sessions were held the evenings of August 13 – 15, 2019 at the Essex Police Department, Brownell Library, and the Town of Essex Fire Department on Sand Hill Rd.



Research Methodology

Listening Sessions - Stimuli

Each participant was given a packet of information:

- Map of Essex community with borders highlighted showing the Town of Essex and Village of Essex Junction within the town borders
- Description of current municipal structure with representation and voting information
- FAQ content from GreaterEssex2020.org
- Current list of shared and separate services
- Tax rates for FY2020 for both Town outside the Village and the Village of Essex Junction
- Proposed conceptual merger options for consideration – two single-municipality options, status quo, and three representation models for a single governing body



Key Findings





Leading Up to a Potential Merger **Why now?**

Some participants were curious what brought merger talks back up after it was voted down in 2007

This was a question brought up in all groups – mixed groups, Village-only groups, and TOV-only groups

Some felt as though 2020 is too early to bring this to a vote, while others said we've been talking about this for decades so let's get it over with



“My perception was we were slowly working towards this. We merged the manager position or the finance office, and we did steps along the way, and it seemed like that was working well as kind of a slow burn towards something. All of a sudden it feels like somebody's hit the gas, and I'm not quite sure why or where that's coming from.”

TOV resident (8-1)

“Where is the drive to keep merging? After we all voted no, it's like watching a bunch of kids that are told they can't eat a cookie, and the cookie sits on the table and they grab a little bite. We said, ‘No, don't eat the cookie,’ but they grab a little piece. And they grab another little piece, and sooner or later that whole cookie is going to be gone, and they're going to say, ‘Well, you let us eat the cookie.’”

TOV resident (8-3)



Leading Up to a Potential Merger

A merger has already started with some benefits observed, but also some resentment



Residents recognize that the consolidation of services has felt like a merger in the making

Some referenced the savings through consolidation as a benefit, which was provided in the educational packet

Residents – mostly TOV residents – expressed concern that consolidation has happened without public vote or input

“When you look at the list of services, there’s not much left that’s separated at this point.”

TOV resident (8-3)

“Everything that can be done without this big vote is being done. As far as I can see it’s being done well. The things that are saving money may be saving money by not spending, but we’re still saving and benefitting from it. Now the good stuff is in our pockets. Now they’re saying, ‘I have some hard stuff, will you please go for it.’”

TOV resident (8-3)

“I’m sorry, but they did merge a lot of things without our voting input. I’m very concerned about that. It seems very sketchy to me.”

TOV resident (8-3)



Leading Up to a Potential Merger

Town outside the Village residents concerned about lack of representation in process



Before even thinking about representation after a potential merger, some TOV residents express concern about representation during merger talks

The 3-to-2 makeup of the Selectboard “favoring” the Village came up in the TOV groups, and combined with the 5-member Village Board of Trustees gave the perception of imbalance

It was noted that in years past, the Selectboard has been made up of mostly TOV residents

“The school merger is a much better example of how this should be done. The Village, the Town, and Westford all have equal voices in the process leading up to that merger. There is nobody representing only the Town outside the Village concerns. You’re opening yourself up to the criticism and concern about whether or not the process was fair.”

TOV resident (8-1)

“I think the bigger issue is the fact that we’re talking about a merger when [the makeup of the Selectboard and Board of Trustees] is so lopsided.”

TOV resident (8-3)

“There have been several others that have suggested there needs to be some kind of independent board outside of the Selectboard to sit down and negotiate with the Trustees.”

TOV resident (8-1)



Leading Up to a Potential Merger

Present a clear vision and potential benefits

To understand “why now,” all residents, regardless of location, wanted to get a sense of the vision and big picture benefits associated with a merger

Residents didn’t feel equipped themselves to say what the perceived benefits are – they’re leaning on the municipal government officers to outline the vision

Some residents noted – and appreciated – that savings haven’t been promised with merger

“The problem I have is no one has presented a ‘wow’ moment. If somebody could say, ‘If we merge, we’re going to see this benefit as a community.’ There is none that I could see or that anyone can eloquently explain to me, so we’re just spending money after money...”

TOV resident (8-3)

“I need to hear ‘this is our vision for the community of Essex, this is where we want it to go.’ I’m confident the details will work out. I don’t need to see the nitty-gritty, but I need to understand the path and the manner where this is taking us.”

Village resident

“I think what we’re missing is the sales pitch for the benefit. I don’t need a projection of that or ‘here is to-the-penny of how much your taxes are going down.’”

TOV resident (8-1)



Leading Up to a Potential Merger

Need to have the right amount of detail



Participants recognize there are many unanswered questions, specifically around tax impacts and service quality

They recognize it could be easy to get lost in the details, that's why they need just enough information to evaluate whether a proposal would result in a net benefit

There were also questions around the voting process that they say haven't been made clear – Would Village residents get to vote twice? Would this be subject to a re-vote like last time?

“Most people aren't going online and reading the minutes. Too much information gets completely ignored. What people want to see is an idea of cost and services. What are we getting? What are we paying? What's changing for us?”

Village resident

“I think the question is ‘how is this going to affect my tax rate?’ That's the bottom line. And I'm not sure if that question has been answered.”

TOV resident (8-1)

“We don't need to get at each other over all the little things. What we're trying to do is see if this can work.”

Village resident

“I want to see what's going to be improved. What's going to go down. What's going to go up in cost. What's going to improve in quality. What's going to go down in cost. What's going to go down in quality.”

Village resident



Leading Up to a Potential Merger **Communicate early, often, and objectively**

There is a recognition that the vision for merger needs to be shared with all residents to give them enough time to form an opinion

While most in our groups have been in Essex since the last vote, many recognize that there are new residents that need to be brought up to speed on how the municipalities are governed

TOV residents in rural areas feel that many in their location are unaware that merger talks have started up again

It was mentioned that communication shouldn't feel one-sided in favor of a merger rather it should be educational, not promotional, and present the pros and cons

“When people bring up the merger, it’s so polarizing. Whether you are either for or against it most people don’t even know anything about it.”

TOV resident (8-3)

“We don’t bump elbows, like folks in the Village do.”

TOV resident (8-3)

“Are they going to make sure they notify everyone properly? I know a lot of people don’t get those notifications.”

TOV resident (8-3)

“[Last time] it was basically ‘buy a car. We’re not going to tell you what kind, what the engine is, what the gas mileage is. But buy it.’”

TOV resident (8-3)



Concepts Evaluated in Groups: Potential Municipal Governance Models

Option 1: Unified Charter	Option 2: Unified Charter with Special Tax District(s)	Option 3: Status Quo*
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Town of Essex and Village of Essex Junction charters dissolved• One municipality with a new charter and one elected governing body• One tax rate for the entire municipality (the transition plan may require temporary tax districts until the rate is equalized)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Town of Essex and Village of Essex Junction charters dissolved• One municipality with a new charter and one elected governing body.• Different tax rates based on perpetual Tax District(s) for certain services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Continue with two charters for Town of Essex and Village of Essex Junction• Two municipalities, two charters with two elected governing bodies• Two tax rates with some shared services and some separate services, uncombined and budgeted separately*

Concepts Evaluated in Groups

Potential Municipal Governance Models

**Status Quo (Option 3) Services Status*

Shared Services	Separate Services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager’s Office • Police Department • Clerk’s Office • Finance Department • Senior Center • Public Works Department • Human Resources Department • Information Technology Department 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire Departments • Libraries • Parks and Recreation Departments • Community Development Departments • Capital Planning • Elected and Appointed Officials



Governance Models

Status quo is not a true option

Though participants weren't willing to accept just any proposed merger option, they mostly also weren't in favor of keeping Status Quo

It was seen as a non-option considering the perception that consolidation was already taking place

We heard residents express desire to just pick a merger option over Status Quo to avoid these discussions creeping up every few years



"If we do Status Quo we'll be back here in 10 years"

Village resident

"I could see supporting a merger to get this damn issue off the table once and for all."

TOV resident (8-1)

"[If we stick with Status Quo] are they going to continue guerrilla merging things?"

Village resident

"I'm against Status Quo because I want us to focus on the actual important things in the community. What's stopped us from accomplishing stuff is we always say, 'Well, we don't know what it would look like in a couple years.' Can we just figure out what we're going to look like so we can start figuring out what we need?"

Village resident



Governance Models

Separation was brought up, but most were not in favor

We can count on one hand the number of people that brought up separation for consideration

Separation was discussed in both TOV-only and Village-only groups

Ultimately, many conceded the communities have gone so far with consolidation of services that undoing of that consolidation would be costly



“Essex Junction will have total responsibility of their future and the Town of Essex will have responsibility of their future.”

TOV resident (8-1)

“You don’t have an option to just hold the Village hostage because you have the majority of the vote. You either have to choose between merging or you can choose to [separate]. One way or the other, I want it resolved.”

Village resident

“We have fought so many separation battles I don’t even want to hear the word. At this point, we’ve merged so much that I think we’re beyond where that is an option.”

Village resident



Governance Option 1: One Municipality, Equal Tax Rate **Receptiveness to tax equalization was largely divided between Village and TOV**



Village residents support tax equalization and believe it's key to feeling "unified"

TOV residents are more divided – though most don't like the idea of taxes going up, many would feel better about tax equalization if representation were guaranteed to be equal

"Until there is tax equity, I don't believe that we'll ever really be able to come together."

Village resident

"It's silly to have two municipalities but on the same token, don't raise my tax."

TOV resident (8-1)

"If there's a little more honesty, clarity, and transparency around if you merge and get to tax equity, and odds are some people's taxes are going up and some are going down, I'm not necessarily opposed to that. The amounts aren't huge. But I'd want to know 'why?'"

TOV resident (8-1)

"If it's done right and people are allowed to speak, I think there will be more people in the Town more supportive of [tax equalization] than we realize. I know a lot of people in the Town."

Village resident



Governance Option 1: One Municipality, Equal Tax Rate **With a tax increase, the expectation is equal access to high quality services for all**

Most assumed a tax increase for TOV residents, rather than meeting in the middle or a decrease of the Village municipal tax rate to Town levels

An increase was seen as maintaining the quality of services while providing equal access to all residents

TOV residents would want more service in the form of new amenities, sidewalks, plowing, and more street signs for safety purposes

“I want equity throughout services. If my child can’t go to Maple Street Park, I want to know that if they end up at Sand Hill Park, which maybe has a daycare, which looks like it may be the same style, that it has the same quality to it.”

Village resident

“My expectations would be that good services would be offered to everybody in a wider town.”

Village resident

“I want sidewalks and bike lanes on both sides of Old Stage Road, so all bicyclists, joggers, and walkers can be safe.”

TOV resident (8-3)

“I would expect equal access to all services. The rec dept., the library. I’d now be a resident of everything.”

TOV resident (8-3)

“Essex is Essex. That’s the way it should be. No different.”

TOV resident (8-1)



Governance Option 1: One Municipality, Equal Tax Rate **Rural TOV residents want others to know they still have high costs despite their lower tax rate**



When considering one tax rate and the prospect of paying for unused services, rural residents of the Town bring up the fact that they personally foot the bill for services like water and septic systems and those add up over time

“I don't have sidewalks. I don't have fire hydrants. I don't have city water. I don't have street lights. If my well goes bad, nobody pays for it. My septic system went bad. Nobody from the village helped pay for my new septic system. My driveway washes out. I foot the bill for that. That's why I live out where I live, because I would never expect to have to pay for those because I plan on footing the bill for those on my own. To think that sometime in the future, I'm going to paying for sidewalks that I'm never going to use and amenities that frankly I never wanted in the first place, it's a little abrasive to me.”

TOV resident (8-3)

“I look at the big, big, big costs that I've had to maintain my acres outside of the village. It's very, very expensive. I paid at least \$25,000 for water since 1997. Our well went dry while I was having our first kid, so I remember. There are very, very expensive costs to living in the country. We knew that going in. I don't expect people to pay that for me. That was by choice.”

TOV resident (8-3)



Governance Option 1: One Municipality, Equal Tax Rate **With a tax increase, TOV residents would want more say in development**

A trade-off TOV residents can envision with paying a higher tax rate than they currently do is being able to have more say or perhaps guarantee development doesn't disrupt their community

One respondent also mentioned being able to have more say in Village development, seeing it as part of the Town in which she lives

"I would want to keep the Town "the Town" if I'm going to pay extra. Maybe I'll do it. But I don't want the Village to control the Town."

TOV resident (Not sure of district)

"The only reason I live where I do is to have the surroundings that I have. They're being encroached on very quickly and I'm being told what I can and can't do by the Selectboard more and more often on my own property."

TOV resident (8-3)

"My question has been with all the development going on in the Village is 'do we have representation?' As a person outside the Village line, I'm appalled. That's the middle of my town, and I have no say in what's happening inside the Village because I live 50 feet outside of it."

TOV resident (8-1)



Governance Option 1: One Municipality, Equal Tax Rate **A gradual step up to equalization, but don't stretch it out for too long**

Though Village residents would ideally go for immediate tax equalization, they recognize that the Town couldn't absorb a big hit upfront if there is to be acceptance of tax equalization

3-5 years was seen by most Village and TOV residents as an acceptable range

Though tax equalization could occur over time, it is imperative for TOV residents that the new governance structure/ representation model be put in place immediately

"Tax equity absolutely, but I'm also empathetic of the people in the Town [outside the Village]."

Village resident

"Five [years] would be the most that would make sense. \$800 of tax equity spread over a five-year period, that's enough time to find another option [if it's distressing you]. Ten years sounds like typical drawn out government stuff."

Village resident

"Be upfront with how much it will be total, but say 'we're going to do it over five years.'"

TOV resident (8-1)

"I'd be more in favor of ripping off the Band-Aid."

TOV resident (8-1)



Governance Option 2: One Municipality, Tax Districts

“What is a Special Tax District?”

Many residents had lots of questions about Special Tax Districts, notably:

- What are they?
- Are they the same as what we have now – different tax rates between Village and TOV?
- Who decides what these Tax Districts are and will they be known prior to a vote for merger?

At face value, many were confused and not in favor of Special Tax Districts

“What I really need to know is not what the district is going to be but how much the tax is going to be.”

Village resident

“How does a Special Tax District get governed? I want information about how people are either elected, appointed, or hired to run a Special Tax District.”

Village resident

“I’m in favor of one government. Special Tax Districts makes it more complicated than it needs to be.”

TOV resident (8-3)

“From what I’ve heard, they have quite an ability to raise taxes when they want to and it can be a real problem.”

TOV resident (8-1)



Governance Option 2: One Municipality, Tax Districts **Special Tax Districts perpetuate the divide**

There was a perception that Special Tax Districts would preserve the division between Village and Town and wouldn't help the community move toward one municipality with shared services and equal access

"In my mind it divides us even more. I understand why [it's being proposed] because people are getting different services."

Village resident

"Not a better option unless I understood that it was dissolvable. The word 'perpetual' makes it a problem. It negates the idea of a united municipality."

Village resident

"I really don't like [Special Tax Districts]. If we're going to merger we should merge and all get the best out of it."

TOV resident (8-1)

"Philosophically in a community where we all live together, I don't understand the desire to make these special districts that only certain people use. We're all in this together. We all live here together."

Village resident

"I'm hoping we can get rid of the 'we're paying more' and the 'us vs. them' mentality."

Village resident



Governance Option 2: One Municipality, Tax Districts **Special Tax Districts could actually be a good compromise**



Some did see benefit in Special Tax Districts as a way to appease parts of the community that don't want to pay for unused services or would want exclusive access to services

"I think [Special Tax Districts] is the best go. You're basically merging everything that needs to be merged, but at the same time you're still giving people what they want...the difference in taxes."

TOV resident (8-3)

"How do you alleviate some of those concerns from the folks that are really against the idea of merger? Did you identify those services that are non-negotiable? That this [service] has to only be for the Town, this has to be only for the Village. A big benefit of Special Tax Districts is you could provide those services to either or both of the two communities if folks are dead set against the merger."

Village resident

"The only reason I see to use these Special Tax Districts is to protect 8-3 because they're normally the vocal group in the community that doesn't use those services."

Village resident



Representation

Representation is the heart of the issue for Town outside the Village residents



Ensuring they have someone to represent the concerns of their community is central to any discussion around merger for TOV residents

Both leading up to a vote and in a proposed merged municipality, they're sensitive to the representation structure

"I'm less concerned about how we pay for things and how we share that with the understanding that you might need something I don't and I might need something that you don't. I'm much more concerned about representation. Because I actually do think the needs across different neighborhoods, even in my own community are different if I live in one of the new high rises going up versus if I live on a dirt road."

TOV resident (8-1)

"[Representation] is the main reason I wanted to come tonight."

TOV resident (8-3)



Concepts Evaluated in Groups: Potential Representation Options for a Governance Structure with One Elected Governing Body

At Large Elections Only	Two (or more) Voting Wards**	Combination of Two (or more) Voting Wards** and At Large Elections
<p>Anyone residing anywhere in the entire community could run for election to the governing body.</p>	<p>The elected governing body would have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• half its members residing in the town outside the village and• half its members residing in the village <p><i>**Borders may change over time based on population</i></p>	<p>The elected governing body would include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• members residing in the town outside the village• members residing in the village• members residing anywhere in the entire community <p><i>**Borders may change over time based on population</i></p>



Representation Option 1: At Large **At large eliminates division, but there's the risk of lopsidedness**

Those in favor of a model with at large representatives say it would do the most in moving toward a unified municipality and eliminate borders – both real or artificial

Others like an at large model because they don't believe there are enough qualified people to run with a ward-style structure

Those against an at large model feel that it would run the risk of favoring the more densely populated Village

“This is only based on four years of living here, but if we're going to do something I think it should really be going as one unit, not anything with separate districts and making it more complex than it is.”

Village resident

“I like to be able to look at what the person is bringing to the table and voting for them regardless of whether on Pearl Street in Essex Junction or whether they live on Brigham Hill Road. For what they're going to bring in terms of their years of experience and their thoughtfulness.”

TOV resident (8-3)

“The Town is very concerned about being represented so if it's at large and all the members end up from the Village, that will not be good.”

Village resident

“When the population was more Town-heavy, it tended to dominate the Selectboard. Now the Village seems more mobilized, and they're dominating.”

TOV resident (8-3)



Representation Option 2: Two or More Voting Wards



There was more consensus among TOV and Village residents in favor of wards

Those in favor of ward-based representation liked that it gave TOV residents the representation they want and overall results in a sense that hyper-local concerns – no matter where in the community – are more likely to be heard

The biggest concern raised with wards is ensuring there are enough quality candidates to fill seats, though some thought this structure could actually encourage people to run

Another concern was the question of who decides what are the wards and when would that be decided – before a merger vote?

“I wholeheartedly believe we should be one community. At the same time, I don’t think every facet of our community has the same needs. I like the idea of multiple wards.”

TOV resident (8-3)

“I don’t want to see anybody left out and I’d like to see wards drawing a geographical equal population and let it take us where it takes us. At that point, I would trust the people to work out the taxing issues fairly as long as there were enough people representing everybody.”

TOV resident (8-3)

“I like the idea of representatives that you know who to go to for a response. I’ve definitely had experiences writing to one, two, five board members and none of them reply.”

Village resident



Representation Option 2: Two or More Voting Wards **More than two wards preferred – and not just “Village” and “Town Outside the Village”**

Most groups advocated for or asked about the possibility of a ward-based governing body with more than two wards

It was perceived that with two wards and saying half from TOV and half from the Village would perpetuate a divide and “us vs. them” mentality

A few noted that TOV should even be split with equal representation from the more suburban 8-1 district and more rural 8-3 district

Others advocated for even more wards that were more neighborhood based as a way to keep representation even more local

“I like using the three districts, because it sorts us pretty evenly in the sense of the differences in the community. I think if we only focus on [Village and Town outside the Village as a whole], we are going to cause problems in 8-3 because it is a different part of our community and I think we keep forgetting that.”
Village resident

“[Ideal representation] is not on here. We have three districts and having equal representation across all districts.”
TOV resident (8-3)

“I would advocate for as many as 10. Maybe even more. It’s local government. It should be as close to the constituents that are represented as possible.”
TOV resident (8-3)



Representation Option 3: Combination of At Large and Wards **A combo of at large and wards can offer a balanced approach, but some thought it was too much**

Those in favor of a combo like that it offers guaranteed representation with the option of voting for someone who would represent the whole community

One of the TOV only groups gravitated toward it as a favorite option for that reason

Some saw it as a step approach to a fully at large model after a few years

Those against it felt like it was overkill

“I came in thinking probably district-based, ward-based voting was the best solution but I like the arguments for people who are elected to represent the whole and the broader perspective.”

TOV resident (8-1)

“I do like that option because I feel like I can, in that case you can vote for the best person for the job which may be me in another district.”

Village resident

“The problem I see with the at-large combination with the wards is why would anybody want to run at large when they have to campaign over such a large area? Knock a lot more doors than if I'm just doing the town or the town outside the village.”

Village resident



Representation

A mayor could bring vision and would be held accountable

Two groups – one Village-only group and one TOV-only group – brought up the idea of having a mayor

An argument for a mayor position is that she or he would develop a platform and vision that voters would get choose in an election while also holding that person accountable

A mayor could also represent a tie-breaking vote should a ward-style representation model result in an even number of representatives



“The mayor would help us develop a united community and be an inspirational figure.”

Village resident

“It's more accountable. They're able to be approached in public with questions and not just poo poo a concern I have over the phone.”

Village resident



Identity

Village residents are willing to cede naming priority to Town of Essex in a merged community

Though our conversations didn't allow much time to discuss the identity of a merged community, it was brought up

Most recognized the potential of derailing the discussion if the Essex Junction name were forced upon the entire community

Village residents believed the Essex Junction name would live on unofficially regardless

"I am not going to go feuding about the situation for 20 years and say, 'I want tax equity, I want tax equity.' Then, 'I want my name on the package too.' Now, if I'm going to get tax equity I'm perfectly happy to go as one community called 'Town of Essex.'"

Village resident

"Essex Junction will always be called the Junction. The Village isn't going to lose its identity. It will still be the Village, whether it is a governmental thing or not."

Village resident



Culture

“Us vs. Them” isn’t a day-to-day sentiment, only when loudest voices stir the pot



While residents recognize different concerns and cultural differences by jurisdiction, overall they don’t perceive there to be an “us vs. them” mentality that resides in the community

Perceived divisiveness can come as a result of a vocal minority on either side of the merger issue

Many talked about the multi-cultural aspects that come as a result of Essex containing urban, suburban, and rural areas within its borders as a strength and a highlight of the community

“I’m an outsider, I’ve only been here 13 years. I don’t see, I don’t get, I don’t understand the cultural differences, or I don’t get that there is a difference.”

TOV resident (8-3)

“I do [see the ‘Us vs. Them’ mentality], but only with respect to small vocal minority of the Town outside the Village. Day-to-day talking to my friends in and outside of the Village, no I don’t see it.”

Village resident

“I honestly believe that there isn’t. It’s just perpetuated by some people. There’s a large percentage of this town who do not understand the divide or feel it.”

Village resident

“In terms of identity, we’re stronger together. If we’re able to build a true sense of community where we can bring all of our different perspectives openly to the table, it builds a stronger community. Maybe there are different identities, and that is where our strength comes from.”

TOV resident (8-1)



Takeaways & Recommendations





Takeaways

Participants in the Listening Sessions, for the most part, were a well-informed crowd. Many regularly attend annual meetings and occasionally Selectboard/Trustee meetings. They referenced specific op-eds in the *Reporter* and at least one wrote an op-ed recently.

Given the time commitment required to participate, it wasn't completely unexpected participants were "above average" on knowledge and engagement in local government matters. The audience skewed toward older ages and those that have lived in the community since before the previous merger vote.

Action Items

- The final survey should be cognizant of the fact that many don't have much time to share their opinion or may not feel equipped – position the survey as 10-15 minutes to share your thoughts on the future of Essex, no matter how long you've lived here or how much you've engaged with local government
- Explore paid social media ads targeting younger and newer residents in order to bring more of their voices into the conversation



Takeaways

Many of the groups began with residents asking, “Why are we talking about merger now?”

In addition, they lean on the current municipal governments to present the vision, benefits, and just enough detail to let them properly evaluate the proposition without getting too overwhelmed.

Action Items

- Articulate a clear vision of what a merged community looks like, including a key benefit or a few key benefits all residents will be able to enjoy – but make sure all communication is educational and objective, not promotional
- Be upfront that the November 2020 election is likely to be one in which there will be a high turnout, resulting in an ideal opportunity for the majority of Essex residents to cast their vote on a possible merger
- Keep sharing the timeline leading up to a possible vote, including key milestones such as planned public meetings/workshops and when outreach will take place
- Use the survey to understand how often and in which channels resident want communication



Takeaways

There was no clear cut favorite among the Municipal Governance concepts nor the Representation Options, but there was receptiveness within each group. Pros and cons were noted for each option, and in some cases, suggestions were made to revise or improve upon an option, such as expanding the ward concept into three or more wards to ensure local concerns are represented.

Regarding timing of tax equalization, most agreed that should that move forward, a 3-5 year timeline would be acceptable.

Action Items

- Use the survey as a way to quantify how a larger pool of residents feel about the identified pros and cons of each concept – for example, what percent of residents are concerned that a ward-style representation model wouldn't be supported with enough quality local candidates
- Ask survey respondents to identify their favorite combination of Municipal Governance + Representation Option while also asking which ones they'd vote for, even if it wasn't their preferred option
- Consider including options that were suggested by the groups but not listed in the material for evaluation – neighborhood wards (at least 3 wards), an option with a mayor, and separation



Takeaways

Some residents had a hard time evaluating concepts at this level without much detail, particularly in regard to Special Tax Districts.

People wanted a better sense of the benefits or trade-offs with each approach.

They wanted to know whether Special Tax Districts will be defined along with the vote or after.

Action Items

- For the purposes of the survey and in order to help residents feel they have what they need to evaluate options, add some additional detail, context or examples that help explain the conceptual options – don't include so much that it feels overwhelming
- Be transparent when you do not have a detail people may be curious about, such as prospective tax rates – state a reason why that information is not included or can't be calculated
- Include a simple definition of Special Tax Districts, some examples, and answer the questions of when they can be created, how they're voted on, and how they're managed



Takeaways

Not only are TOV residents concerned about equal representation within a merged government, they are concerned about equal representation in the process leading up to a potential merger vote

Action Items

- Be transparent in communications and public meetings about about the make-up of the joint Governance Subcommittee working on this
- When possible, ensure that input for potential merger options – both public input and government official input – is considerate of the needs of all parts of Essex
- Emphasize that all residents of Essex will have the opportunity to respond to our survey and ultimately all residents of Essex will have equal say in whether a merger passes



Next Steps

First draft of next resident survey – Thursday, August 29

Meet to discuss survey draft – Thursday, September 5

Launch resident survey – Wednesday, September 18

Presentation of survey results – Thursday, October 17



Thank You





Appendix: Participant Characteristics





Participant Characteristics

Location

- **25** Town outside the Village
- **26** Village of Essex Junction

Voting District

- **14** registered in 8-1
- **24** registered in 8-2
- **11** registered in 8-3
- **2** registered, not sure of district

Gender

- **32** Female
- **19** Male

Age

- **4** 25-34
- **11** 35-44
- **9** 45-54
- **10** 55-64
- **4** 75+

Have Children Under 18

- **19** Yes
- **32** No

Years Lived in Essex

- **3** Less than five
- **2** 5-9 years
- **5** 10-14 years
- **7** 15-19 years
- **11** 20-24 years
- **23** 25+ years

Merger Discussion Familiarity

- **6** Extremely familiar
- **16** Very familiar
- **23** Moderately familiar
- **5** Slightly familiar
- **1** Not at all familiar

Total participants: 51