



**HEART
& SOUL
OF
ESSEX**

Wrap-up Meeting & Celebration February 10 2014

Summary

On February 10, 2014, over 100 community members gathered at Essex High School for a celebration and culminating report about the work of the Heart & Soul of Essex. Participants included people who live or work in Essex. Guests of honor included an unprecedented breadth of community leaders from within and outside of the village, including elected officials, members of municipal commissions and boards, school board members and municipal staff.

The meeting featured a report about project accomplishments and a conversation with attendees about the future of Heart & Soul. Below is a project summary as presented during the meeting.

BACKGROUND

During the summer of 2011, a diverse group of youth and adults who live or work in Essex (both within and outside the village) met for several months to prepare a joint application for an Orton Family Foundation planning grant. Our team included residents, town and village representatives, planners, public and private sector partners, staff and elected officials.

This group believed the Heart & Soul grant could help Essex

- Have a new conversation that focused more on the identification of shared interests across the community (as opposed to the historical conversation about the relationship between the village and the town).
- Improve communication and collaboration between town and village.
- Tap into new civic energy that sparked a successful revitalization effort in the village center.
- Make sure that as Essex continues to grow and change we hold onto what is special about our community and to ensure that the changes that do happen reflect what matters to the people who live and work here.



Heart & Soul Board members (also known as the CAT) at work

Project Goals

The project set out to...

- Engage people from all parts of our community to help gain an understanding of our history, opportunities, and challenges;
- Identify a set of shared values that will drive community decision making in the future;
- Identify actions the community could take right away to bring our values to life.

With the hope that this work will lead to...

- Coordinated planning efforts that reflect the community values in land use planning and municipal work;
- A culture that encourages and supports residents who want to participate in the civic life of our community;
- A landscape that reflects local values.

WHAT WE DID

We engaged a diverse group of people who live or work in Essex.

Heart & Soul of Essex reached out to many different people in the community. While the project didn't meet all of its goals to engage some of the most hard to reach residents, a diverse mix of people who live or work in Essex participated. A special effort was made to engage people who live inside and outside the village, and we successfully included people who live in all nine of the Front Porch Forum Neighborhoods.

Heart & Soul estimates that the initiative engaged well over 1,000 people (5% of the population of Essex).



A full house during the Orton Family Foundation's initial site

We filled a unique set of roles.

During the grant period, Heart & Soul of Essex played three key roles in the community.

The whole venture has been amazing to watch and has been incredibly organized and publicized.

Kim Maiberger, participant

Convener (hosting and coordinating a variety of events including large public forums, facilitated small group community conversations, and a community-wide public art project)

Connector (connecting citizens with local government, building relationships among Town and Village staff and other community organizations, connecting the community's input with decisions).

Champion/Advocate (ensuring community values are incorporated into decision-making and acknowledging the people and organizations that are taking action to strengthen community values)

We used a variety of approaches to engage the community.

(see page 9 for a complete list of activities)

- personal invitations (phone calls and handwritten notes)
- small group facilitated dialogues
- community summits
- talking to people where they are (living rooms, events, etc.)
- meet-ups organized by community interests
- keypad polling
- informed people through social media and e-newsletter
- combination of small and large group venues
- combination of “thick” and “thin” engagement strategies (an example of thick engagement is participating in a multiple hour conversation or forum while examples of thin engagement include answering a brief survey or stopping by a booth at a community gathering and sharing a quick opinion)



WHAT WE LEARNED

The people of Essex want to be included in decisions about the future.

We had excellent participation in all of our events even though the conversations weren't organized around an urgent issue. People will show up if they are offered a warm invitation and an inviting structure and venue.

We identified six core community values.



The people we talked to shared a wide range of opinions and ideas about the community. Six core values emerged very strongly. These values may seem obvious, which is a good thing. Values are supposed to be enduring. Even so, when we look at how these values are defined, they are unique to Essex and represent our particular hopes for the future (for a description of the community's values, please see page 8).

Many of the community's hopes are already being addressed.

Once we identified our core values, we surveyed the community to make sure these resonated with a broader group of residents. We also provided several opportunities for community members to share their ideas for ways to bring our values to life. We learned that the community and the municipalities are already working on many initiatives that are aligned with our values. Below are just a few examples.

- ✓ **Bike/Walkability** - town officials are currently working with CCRPC and surrounding areas to improve bike and walk connectivity. The village is developing a bike and walk master plan.
- ✓ **Essex Eats Out** - a citizen group, led by Essex faith leaders is working on a plan to bring the community together to enjoy free community dinners on Friday's beginning in April.
- ✓ **Co-working space** - The Essex Economic Development Commission just completed a survey to see if there is interest in creating a co-working space for Essex residents who work from home.

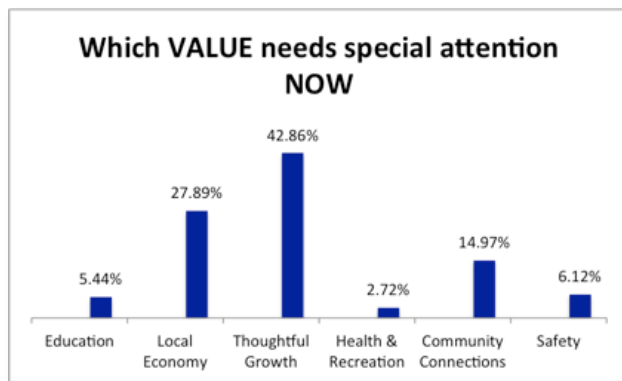
Essex has multiple strengths to build on.

The community had several opportunities to assess how well we are doing in relation to each of our values. A majority of the almost 200 folks who attended our Action Summit (75%) think we are doing well on most of the values. We take pride in many community assets, including our highly regarded schools, libraries and recreation departments and we want to see these institutions continue to improve.



We used keypad polling during the Action Summit to gauge community priorities

Essex should pay particular attention to two of our core values.



Thoughtful Growth and Local Economy are the two values that people are most concerned about, with 43% of participants saying that Thoughtful Growth is the value that needs attention right now.

Consistent priorities emerged across groups.

There was a lot of alignment among formal and informal community leaders. There was also a lot of alignment between the people who live in the town outside the village and within the village on most issues.

However, strengthening **Community Connections** was especially important to town residents (24% of Essex residents who live in the town outside the village prioritized community connections as an important value that needs attention, compared with only 11% of Essex residents who live inside the village).

WHAT'S CHANGED?

We set the stage for better collaboration and improved communication.

- The Heart & Soul Community Advisory Team (CAT) and project staff included youth and adult residents who live in all parts of Essex as well as elected and municipal officials from the town and the village.
- Heart & Soul provided multiple opportunities for town and village elected officials, planning commissions and municipal staff to talk together about the future of the community.
- During the grant period, village trustees and town selectboard worked together to hire Pat Scheidel to be the first shared manager in more than 40 years.

The community values offer a useful framework for collaboration across organizations. This work inspired me to meet with town planners recently to discuss the implications of future growth for our schools. I was impressed that our planners are staying abreast of educational issues and look forward to ongoing communication between the Essex Select board and the Essex Town School Board as the needs of Essex and its school system change."

Mark Andrews, Superintendent, Essex
Town School District

We built new civic capacity & leadership.



Youth leaders co-moderated many of our events, created films about the project and designed our social media platforms

- New youth and adult leaders stepped forward to manage the project, reach out to the community and lead a wide variety of activities.
- We engaged many people who hadn't been involved before.
- We trained over 30 residents to facilitate public conversations, and engaged many more as volunteers.
- We pioneered new ways to engage people and create successful models that can be replicated.

We served as a catalyst for action.

Three community action teams are moving forward.



School Community Partnership Team

- ✓ **Community Calendar** - [Lara Keenan](#) has taken the lead on the Essex Community Calendar Committee, as it presented the perfect combination of connecting people with one another and with community resources (*Community Connections*)
- ✓ **Multicultural Potluck and Cultural Exchange** - [Jen Bostwick](#) decided to help lead the Multicultural Potluck Dinner group because her family always loved the International Dinner that Summit Street School put on every year. She is now interested in expanding the experience to the entire community (*Community Connections, Health & Recreation and Education*)
- ✓ **School/Community Partnerships** - [Erin Maquire](#), the Executive Director of Student Support Services for CCSU and [Kyle Riester](#), a sophomore at EHS are co-leading this group. This group recognizes that as schools continue to move towards experience based learning and personal learning plans for all students, the need for effective school community partnerships will continue to grow. This group will begin its work by talking with Essex educators to find out what partnerships exist now, what is working well and how we can build on that as we move forward (*Education*)

Community Values are being incorporated in planning.

- ✓ The Brownell Library included values in long range plans
- ✓ Heart & Soul of Essex is working with CCRPC and the village planning commission to incorporate community values in the village comprehensive plan

The Heart and Soul process came at a perfect time for the Brownell Library. We had just begun our own process of updating our Strategic Plan and were able to coordinate our efforts with those of Heart and Soul. As a result we ended up choosing four of the values identified by Heart and Soul - Education, Community Connections, Health and Recreation and Local Economy - as our own long range goals. The Heart and Soul process not only helped us gather information about the library, but also gave us the opportunity to understand and integrate a picture of the entire Essex community into our plan. A perfect fit for us!

Christine Packard, Chair, Brownell Library Board

WHAT'S NEXT?

There is still important work to be done.

Heart & Soul of Essex sees value in continuing to **convene** the community, **connect** people with each other, and to **champion** the community's values. In fact, when we asked participants in the wrap-up meeting how they think we should build on the momentum begun by the Heart & Soul of Essex, their ideas, which are listed below, fit squarely into these three roles:

Convener

- Move forward with community charrette and strategic plan for village core
- Opportunities for healthy dialogue
- Use existing platforms (such as FPF) for neighborhood meet-ups
- Keep bringing folks together several times a year - begin with a social experience, then address topic at hand
- Create community version of Minecraft as a way to bring youth into the conversation

Connector

- There are groups working on almost all of those values - continue to convene these groups and build bridges
- More talking between groups - central processing group
- Opportunities for collaboration with existing groups - central organizing group
- Have the Community Calendar sort information (i.e. if I am interested in _____, how do I get in touch with existing organizations, contacts, etc.)

Champion

- Don't want H & S to go away. Maintain a core group of people to ensure values are being incorporated
- Can we learn what other project towns have done to keep Heart & Soul alive
- Acknowledge young people for participating in community

It is a time of transition.

The grant period ends this month. An interim staff person will be hired with a small amount of funds that remain. This person will keep the community informed about the work of the Heart & Soul Community Advisory Team (CAT). The team will meet during the spring of 2014 to decide whether the Heart & Soul of Essex should continue to fill the roles we've identified. If the answer to that question is "yes" the CAT will identify potential funding sources, and write an implementation grant to the Orton Family Foundation.

We hope you will keep in touch.

Check the Heart & Soul of Essex website as well as our facebook page for the latest news and for specific ideas about how you can help bring our community values to life.

www.heartandsoulofessex.org



CAT members at the 2013 Block Party

COMMUNITY VALUES

LOCAL ECONOMY

Our residents contribute to a vibrant economy by working for and patronizing a diverse mix of businesses, from small, locally-owned enterprises to international corporations. We are committed to fostering an environment that produces a world class workforce and a strong economy for years to come.

HEALTH & RECREATION

We value public places for outdoor and indoor recreation for all ages and abilities. We treasure Indian Brook reservoir, neighborhood parks and the chance to connect by bicycle or on foot. Community institutions provide education and programs to support healthy lifestyles.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Our deep connections with each other make Essex special. Neighbors help each other during good times and bad. We value diversity and welcome everyone. We build our sense of community at local events such as the Memorial Day Parade, Five Corners Farmers Market, and Winter Carnival. Our local newspapers and online forums give us plenty of ways to stay in touch. Residents participate in local government and volunteer.

EDUCATION

Essex invests time, energy, and resources to ensure that our highly respected schools meet the needs of everyone in the community. We are proud to support learning that extends beyond the traditional classroom and includes the arts, athletics, and vocational instruction. Community programs, and libraries offer diverse and affordable opportunities that prepare residents of all ages for lifelong learning and for work in an evolving economy.

THOUGHTFUL GROWTH

We value wide-open spaces and tight-knit neighborhoods, rural roads and vibrant downtown streets. Essex is a place where we can enjoy a beautiful view, walk in the woods and go out to eat without ever leaving town. We support a diverse housing mix, opportunities for business development and a transportation system with a variety of options including a connected network of walking and biking routes.

SAFETY

Essex is a safe place where neighbors watch out for one another. We value an active, visible police force and strong fire and rescue services. Upgrades to our physical infrastructure will allow us to move about our community with comfort and security.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

- **Launch Party** – Brought together over 200 people to kick-off the project and begin a conversation about community values. **September 2012**
- **Neighborhood Conversations** - One of the cornerstones of our activities was a series of 43 Neighborhood Conversations. During these conversations we talked to over 350 people. People met in living rooms, libraries, and businesses. They met in the outermost reaches of rural Essex and in the very center of the village. These structured, yet intimate, two-hour conversations, provided an opportunity for participants to share their experiences living or working in Essex. They identified the values they felt were most important to the community. Participants defined those values and shared their hopes for the future. Each conversation was unique and people expressed a wide range of opinions. Even so, we discovered a clear set of six shared values to guide community decision making. **November 2012 – January 2013**
- **Choose Our Future Survey** - Over 500 community members of all ages answered our survey (including at least 352 people who hadn't yet participated in any Heart & Soul of Essex activities). Survey results affirmed that we accurately captured the values we heard about during the neighborhood conversations and that the values rang true for other community members as well. The survey also gave community members a chance to submit ideas about how to put the values into action and to share other hopes and concerns. **Spring 2013**
- **Pop-up Coffee Shops** - Lots of people we talked with would like to see a new coffee house in town. To build momentum for this idea, we hosted five pop-up coffee shops around town. The pop-ups featured live music, games, bike powered smoothies, snacks, and of course, great coffee. **Spring 2013**
- **Project Partner Meeting** - We brought together our project partners to share the results of the Heart & Soul process to date, and to discuss ways to ensure that planning for the future incorporates the community's values. Over sixty Essex leaders participated in a series of lively and productive discussions at the First Congregational Church. Participants also enjoyed a delicious dinner featuring Nepalese food prepared by Sadhana Ruat. **June 2013**
- **Action Summit & Volunteer Fair** - Nearly two hundred people gathered at Essex High School to learn about the work of the Heart & Soul of Essex, and to set priorities for action. The evening began with a tasty dinner prepared by CCSU Child Nutrition services and the lively sounds of the EHS Jazz Ensemble. A volunteer fair featured over a dozen local organizations. Following dinner, participants identified priorities among the six community values and participated in "meet-ups" to set priorities among hundreds of potential action ideas identified by the community. **September 2013**
- **Mobilizing Our Community Art Project** - Heart & Soul of Essex partnered with CCSU, ETSD and area businesses to bring nationally renowned artist, Kevin Reese, to Essex for a two week artistic residency. Kevin worked with students, businesses and a large number of community volunteers to create large mobiles that were inspired by student's interpretation of what matters most to the people of Essex. The end result is over 50 beautiful pieces of public art that will be displayed in local businesses, municipal buildings and homes and serve as a visual reminder of our community's shared values. **November 2013**
- **Meet-ups** - Brought together over 30 community members who wanted to move forward on three action ideas (Community Calendar, School Community Partnerships, and Multi-cultural Potluck & Cultural Exchange). **December 2013**
- **Wrap-up Celebration** – Brought together over 100 community members including elected officials, board and commission members and municipal staff to share the results of our work. **February 2013**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The accomplishments of the Heart & Soul of Essex belong to the people who live or work in our community. Thank you to everyone who contributed your time, talent and enthusiasm towards this effort. And a heartfelt thanks to the Orton Family Foundation for their financial and technical support throughout the duration of the project.

Community Advisory

Team

John Alden
Darby Brazoski
Andrew Cimonetti
Greg Duggan
Diana Ferguson
Lori Houghton
Trevor Lashua
Brad Luck
Polly McEwing
Mark Mendes
Bridget Meyer
Vasanthi Meyette
Kat Redniss
Kyle Riester
Gabrielle Smith
Katherine Sonnick
Ally Vile
Caisil Weldon
Irene Wrenner

Former Board Members

Doreen Gianelli
Karin Hammer
Liza Kilcoyne
Sharon Pitterson-Ogaldez
Grace Yu

Project Coordinators

Susan McCormack
Liz Subin

Project Partners

Brownell Library
Chittenden Central
Supervisory Union
Essex CHIPS
Essex Junction Recreation
& Parks
Essex Free Library
Essex Town School
District
Five Corners Farmers
Market
Little Free Library of Essex
Railroad Avenue Recess
Town of Essex
Village of Essex Junction

Special thanks to

Julian Bradshaw
Bob Clifford
Kayhl Cooper
Damaris Drummond
Caitlin Fay

Scott Fay
Matthew Gonzalez
Darkroom Gallery
Mary Jo Engel
The Essex Reporter
Jennifer Hao
Tim Jerman
Negesse Gutema
Denise Kerner
Keri-Anne Lesure
Tina Logan
Todd Logan
Elle Lucas
Wendy Johnson
Ariana McBride
Greg Morgan
Toni Morgan
Jaye O'Connell
Susanna Olsen
Village Copy & Print
Fran Stoddard
Ken Signorello
Stephanie Teleen
Margaret Turvey
Linda Waite-Simpson
Dan & Sadhana Ruat

And to our Mobilizing Our Community sponsors

