



July 2019 Essex Resident Survey Findings

July 18, 2019





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Recap of Objectives & Methodology





Research Objectives

Determine the level of awareness of past merger discussions and current level of favorability among residents

Understand potential challenges and perceived benefits of merging Town of Essex and Village of Essex Junction municipal functions and services

Uncover potential topics to probe on in upcoming focus groups and a future survey



Research Methodology

Online / Paper Survey with Essex Residents

Geography: Town of Essex, incl. Village of Essex Junction and Town outside the Village

Age: 18 years or older on November 3, 2020 (Election Day)

Other Exclusions: Not open to Essex Selectboard nor Village of Essex Junction Board of Trustees

Survey Length: 15 minutes / 23 questions

In Field: July 1 - 15, 2019

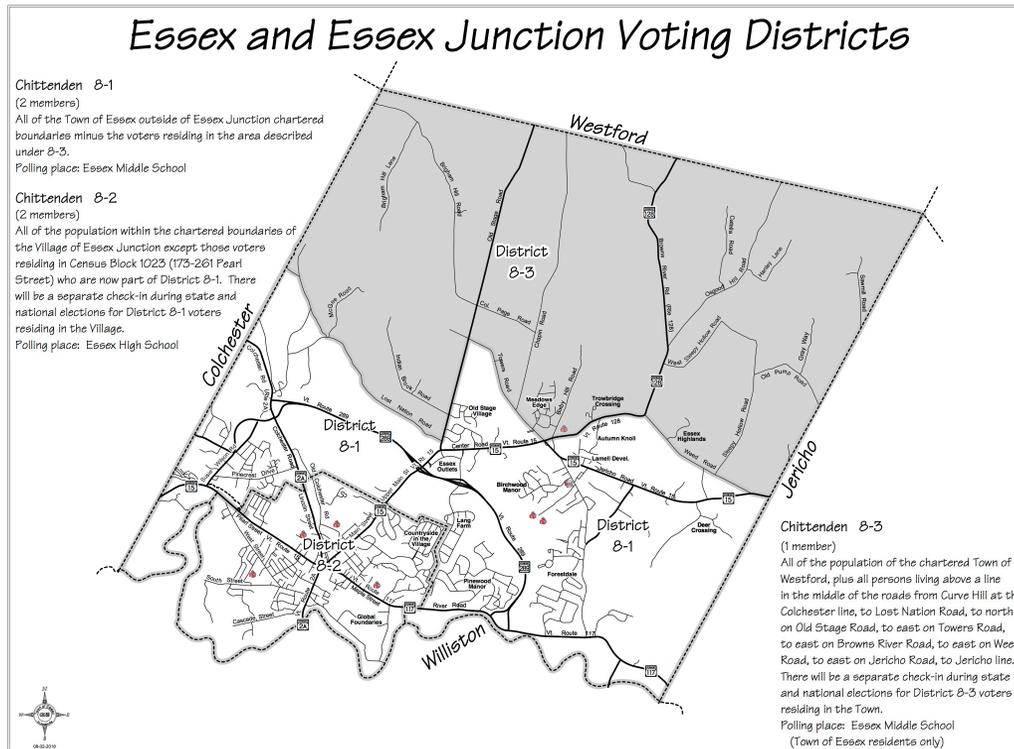
The survey included a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions.



Survey Respondent Characteristics



Survey Respondent Characteristics



Location

- **58.8%** Town outside the Village
- **40.2%** Village of Essex Junction
- **1.0%** Essex resident, not sure where

Voting District

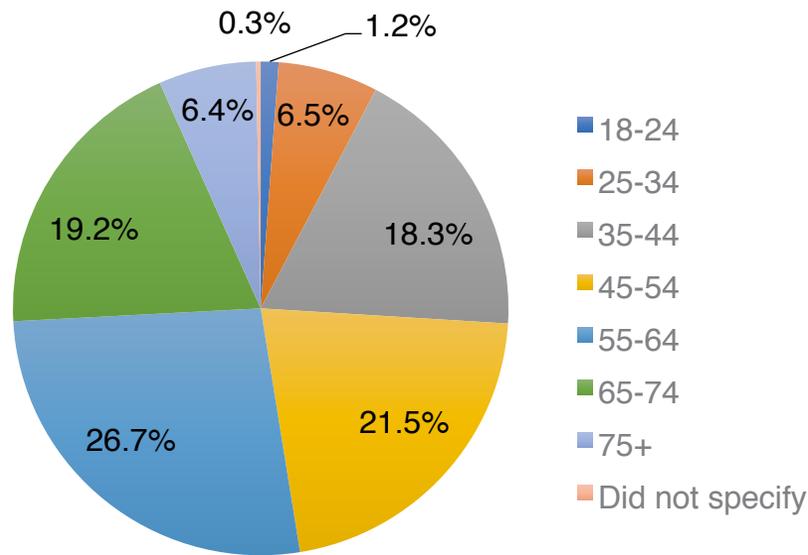
- **38.5%** registered in 8-1
- **31.6%** registered in 8-2
- **17.7%** registered in 8-3
- **10.0%** registered, not sure of district
- **2.2%** not registered to vote

Total completed responses: 690

2017 American Community Survey (US Census Bureau) estimates for Essex residents 18 and older:
 51% live in the Town outside the Village
 49% live in the Village of Essex Junction

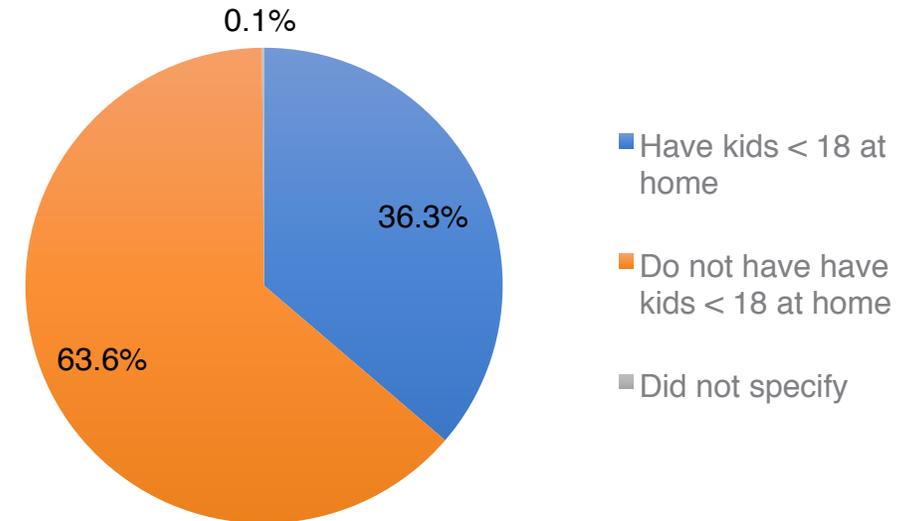
Survey Respondent Characteristics

Age on Nov. 3, 2020



*47.5% of respondents were under 55
52.5% of respondents were 55 and older*

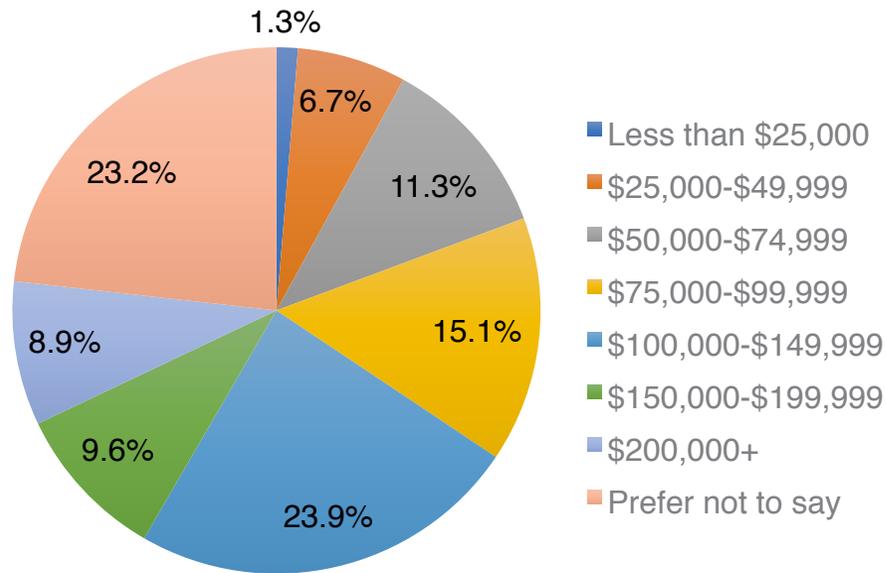
Children Under 18 at Home



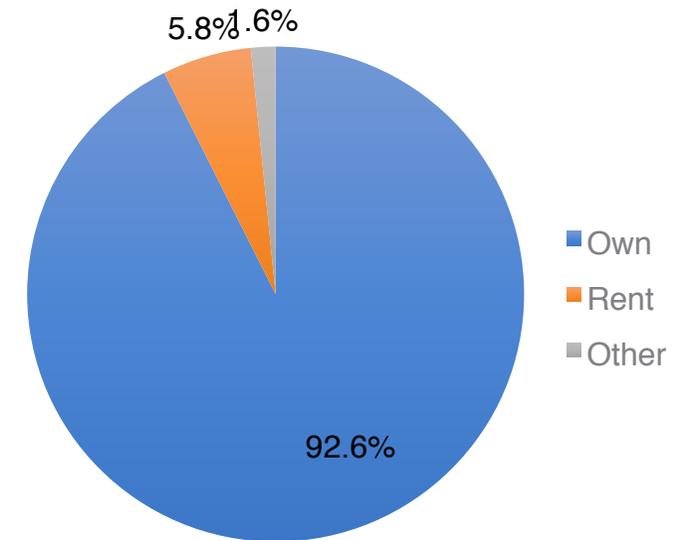
Total completed responses: 690

Survey Respondent Characteristics

Combined Household Income



Homeownership



2017 American Community Survey (US Census Bureau) estimates for Essex:

69.4% of housing units are owner-occupied
30.6% of housing units are renter-occupied

Total completed responses: 690



Key Findings





Key Issues within the Essex Community



Potential merger is within the consideration set of top issues the community faces

Q3 – In your opinion, what is the most important issue facing the Town of Essex and/or the Village of Essex Junction? [open-ended]

Perceived Issue	% of all
Taxes	29.2%
Economic development/attracting residents and businesses	20.3%
Traffic/infrastructure	18.8%
Merger	16.3%
Efficiency/quality of services	9.6%
Identity	6.8%

Please note: This was an open-ended question. Percentages above represent the percent of respondents that cited that particular issue top-of-mind. This list represents the answers most frequently cited and not all issues cited.

- Taxes was the top issue in each Essex voting district
- The merger ranks differently in each voting district
 - 8-1: 2nd most frequently cited issue (19.6%)
 - 8-2: 4th most frequently cited issue (14.7%)
 - 8-3: 3rd most frequently cited issue (12.3%)
- Mentions of the merger as a top issue in the community includes both positive and negative associations



Key Issues within the Essex Community

Essex residents identify the merger as a key issue regardless of whether they favor it

“The single most important project for the Selectboard should be working towards the combination of services, budgets, and efforts between the Village/Town. While progress has been made in this area (Public Works, etc), it seems as though it has taken far too long.”

- 8-1 resident

“Keeping the two communities separate!!”

- 8-1 resident

“Merging in a way that establishes representation for both TOV and Village. The TOV needs to be represented as a community with it’s own perspectives and needs.”

- 8-3 resident

“Stopping backdoor merger”

- 8-2 resident

“How to merge without losing the attributes of each location. How to maintain the specialness of the Town and the Village.”

- 8-2 resident

“Unification! To outsiders the Essex Junction community looks schizophrenic.”

- 8-3 resident



Key Issues within the Essex Community

Other top concerns take precedence, but may also be impacted by merger

Taxes

“Having to pay taxes to the Town when I reside in the Village.”

- 8-2 resident

“TOV residents have been taxed without representation for decades. The merger has enormous implications for both sides.”

- 8-3 resident

Development

“It’s hard to develop or market our community when you get to the part about Village and Town.”

- 8-1 resident

Infrastructure

“The residents in the Village have great use of sidewalks which encourages recreation and reduces traffic. The Town of Essex outside the Village also deserves the right to be connected by bike path and sidewalks. There is a tremendous disconnect in the Town.”

- 8-1 resident

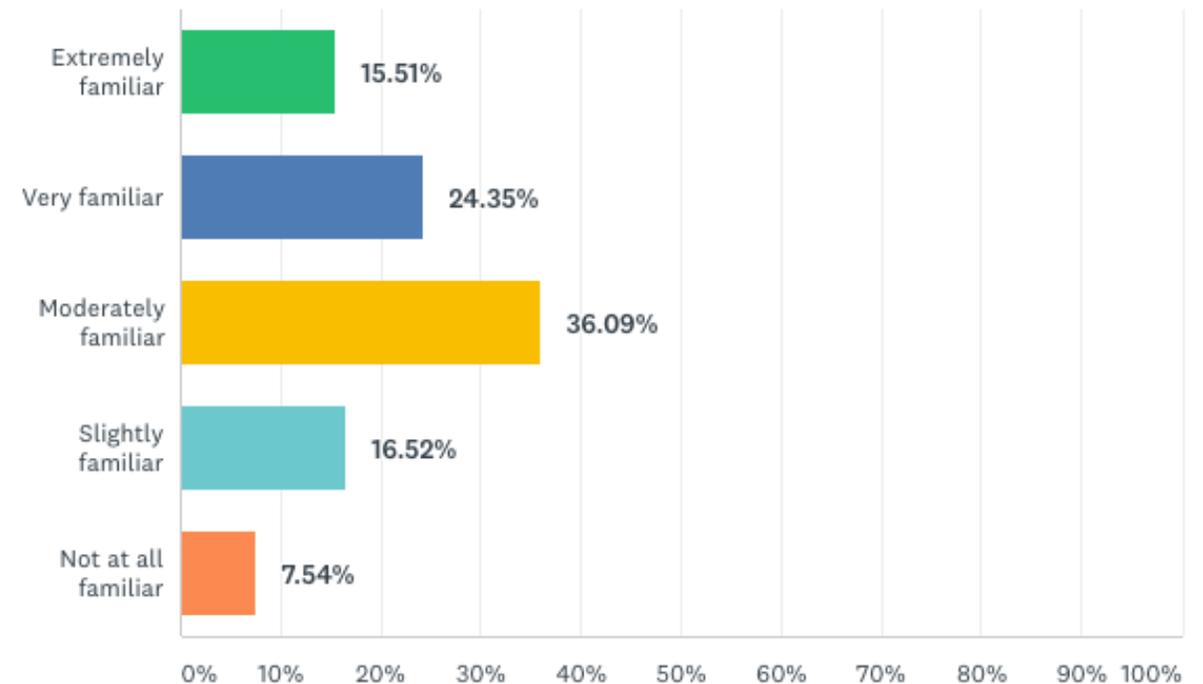


Familiarity With Past Merger Efforts

Three-quarters of Essex residents are at least moderately familiar with merger history

- 4 in 10 Essex residents are at least “very familiar” with past merger efforts
- Younger residents are less familiar
 - 25-34 year olds: Half are “slightly” or “not at all familiar” (only 45 respondents, though)
 - 35-44 year olds: 4 in 10 are “slightly” or “not at all familiar” (126 respondents)

Q6 – How familiar are you with the past efforts to merge the Town of Essex and the Village of Essex Junction under a single government structure?





Familiarity With Governing Structure

Most say they are familiar with the structure of the local governments

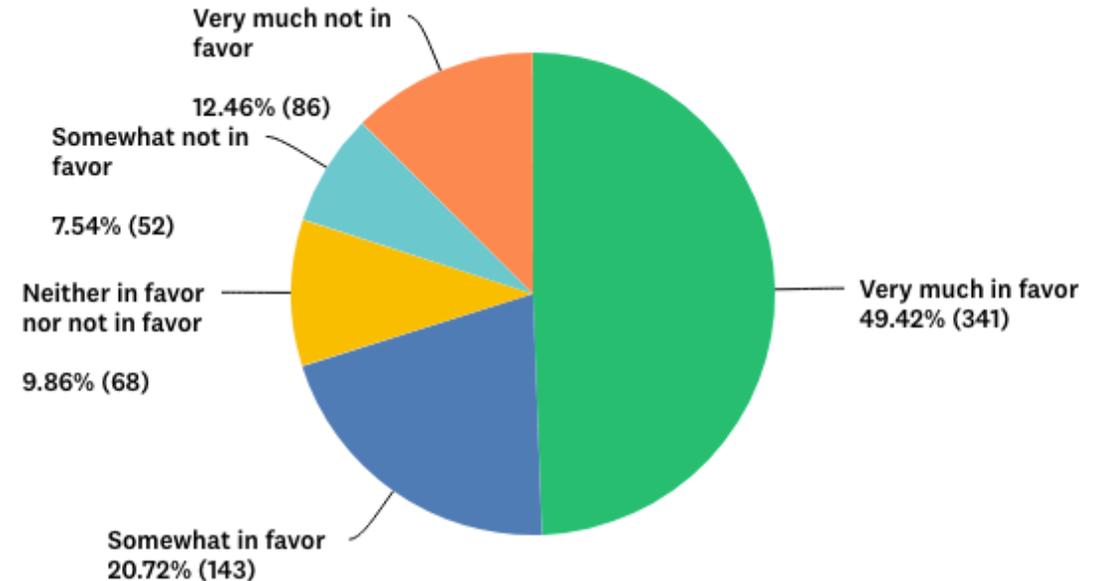
- 7 in 10 Essex residents are at least “moderately familiar” with the structure of local governments – 37% are “very” or “extremely familiar”
- At least 8 in 10 Essex residents were aware of the makeup of the community and the characteristics of the Town of Essex government compared to the Village of Essex Junction government (ex. Village residents also being Town residents, governing board representation of Town/Village, who pays which taxes)

Favorability Toward Merger

7 in 10 Essex residents favor merger at least somewhat, but respondents' income and voting districts reveal differences

- Nearly half of all Essex residents are “very much in favor”
- 2 in 10 oppose merger
- As income increases, so does favorability (HHI \$150-199K = 79% at least “somewhat in favor”) – perhaps lower income means more worry about tax burdens
- District 8-1 is most likely to be in favor (76% at least “somewhat in favor”)
- District 8-3 is most likely to not be in favor (29% at least “somewhat not in favor”)

Q9 – Knowing what you know today and thinking about the future, how much are you in favor of the merger of the Town and Village governments?





Favorability Toward Merger

Voting District Differences

Key issues that result in 8-3 residents showing less favorability toward merger include the possibility of paying for services not used, representation, and taking on the Village’s debts:

“TOV residents paying for services they don’t use – Water? Sewer? Sidewalks?”
- 8-3 resident

“Village residents can out vote the Town residents, particularly on issues like zoning regulations. Result is the rural character of the Town will be at risk.”
- 8-3 resident

“ToV voters having to foot the bill for infrastructure improvements in the Village that were neglected during the time that IBM paid taxes to the Village.”
- 8-3 resident

Voting District	% Somewhat / Very Much in Favor	% Somewhat Not / Very Much Not in Favor
8-1	75.8%	16.2%
8-2	72.5%	19.3%
8-3	63.4%	29.3%
Not sure	55.1%	20.0%



Perceived Challenges

Potential tax increases are the top perceived challenges with merger for Essex residents

Q11 – What do you believe would be challenges or negative impacts, if any, if the Town and Village merged governments? [open-ended]

Perceived Challenge	% of all
Tax increases	17.1%
Equal representation/losing control	9.3%
Losing identity	9.3%
Closures/losing access to services	8.2%
Culture clash/us vs. them	7.9%
No challenges	6.2%
Not sure	19.7%

Please note: This was an open-ended question. Percentages above represent the percent of respondents that cited that particular challenge top-of-mind. This list represents the challenges most frequently cited and not all challenges cited.

“For the Town outside the Village there would be increased taxes and I feel sympathy towards that. Perhaps there could be outreach to ask those residents how this could be amenable to them, such as an incremental increase over several years with some increased control?”
- 8-2 resident

“Achieving tax equity will be a challenge, especially if special cultural districts still remain so that ToV folks pay more in taxes but don’t share in some of the best parts of living in the Village currently (i.e., robust recreation and childcare programming).”
- 8-1 resident

“I foresee even higher taxes.”
- 8-3 resident



Perceived Challenges

Achieving equal representation, losing identity, losing access, and stirring tensions are also top concerns

Equal representation / losing control

"I believe the Town residents would lose our voice and control over our separate interests."

- 8-1 resident

"The Village would be outvoted and underfunded by the Town on issues."

- 8-2 resident

Losing identity

"Loss of identity, but I believe our governance structure can mitigate this. In fact, I believe that including 'neighborhood' representation into the structure stands a chance of better representing our needs than we have today."

- 8-3 resident

Losing access

"I feel like the quality of our rec department would go down and Village residents would no longer get the chance to register first for programs."

- 8-2 resident

Culture clash

"The 'Us vs. Them' mentality [is a challenge.]"

- 8-3 resident

"The Village and Town have very different cultures. People in the Village tend to be more connected and involved and more interested in community building. Many people in the Town seem less inclined to become engaged."

- 8-2 resident



Perceived Challenges

Voting District Differences

Perceived Challenge	% of all	% of 8-1	% of 8-2	% of 8-3
Tax increases	17.1%	20.8%	11.9%	23.8%
Equal representation/losing control	9.3%	8.7%	6.4%	18.9%
Losing identity	9.3%	7.2%	13.8%	10.7%
Closures/losing access to services	8.2%	6.4%	13.3%	4.1%
Culture clash/us vs. them	7.9%	4.2%	9.2%	14.8%
Perception of Village passing debt to Town	5.6%	6.8%	2.3%	10.7%
Eliminating people/jobs	5.5%	8.3%	4.1%	4.1%



Perceived Challenges

Other Perceived Challenges Cited

- 6.5% – Inertia/fear of change
- 6.4% – Actually achieving tax equity / avoiding a big hit to tax bill upfront
- 5.8% – Growing pains / quality of service suffers
- 4.0% – Needing to educate residents about pros and cons/details of plan options
- 3.6% – Larger government leading to more bureaucracy or less personal service
- 2.1% – Navigating the consolidation of services and who decides what
- 1.0% – Not actually saving costs / needing to spend more / not eliminating redundancies
- 1.0% – Perception that school merger wasn't a benefit / negative perception of past consolidation
- 1.0% – Naming / new identity
- 0.9% – Letting old feuds die
- 0.6% – Anticipating organized opposition to merger
- 0.4% – Consolidation of Selectboard and Trustees
- 0.3% – Bigger is not always better
- 0.3% – Town is growing, Village is not, so merger benefits Village more



Perceived Benefits

Essex residents found more consensus in potential benefits; cost efficiencies is cited by over half

Q10 – What do you believe would be the benefits, if any, if the Town and Village merged governments? [open-ended]

Perceived Benefit	% of all
Cost efficiencies/eliminate redundancy	54.9%
Simplification of gov't structure/services	16.5%
United community/one voice	13.4%
Tax equity	9.5%
No benefits	7.7%
Not sure	15.3%

Please note: This was an open-ended question. Percentages above represent the percent of respondents that cited that particular benefit top-of-mind. This list represents the benefits most frequently cited and not all benefits cited.

“Higher efficiencies, reduce costs to run both, easier to manage, one governing entity. Better strategic planning as we would be thinking of both the Town and the Village and ensuring each are moving forward with the best ideas.”

- 8-1 resident

“Merger will result in lower governmental costs (taxes!!) by reducing redundant personnel. A look at the departments which are not yet merged will prove that out.”

- 8-1 resident

“Benefits should be reduction of costs due to economy of scale without sacrificing quality of service.”

- 8-3 resident



Perceived Benefits

Other benefits include simplification of the government, a united community, and tax equity



Simplification

“Simplification of tax bills and what they cover. Ease of knowing what office to go to for services or questions. In the long run, less cost with a streamlined government.”

- 8-1 resident

“Unified community-decision making and image, simpler interaction with municipal services, less duplication of operations.”

- 8-2 resident

Tax equity

“Tax equity across our Town, while hopefully maintaining our excellent quality of services and, in specific instances like the Fire Department and the Libraries, maintaining the unique identity of each under the common municipal structure.”

- 8-2 resident

United community

“Hopefully we could finally get away from the Hatfield’s and the McCoy’s mentality.”

- 8-1 resident

“More cohesion in long range goals and planning. If done properly, less tension between the Town and Jct. A healthier community.”

- 8-3 resident

“Tax equity” was the benefit cited most often by 8-2 residents after cost efficiencies. 18.8% of 8-2 residents mentioned “tax equity,” compared to 6.0% of 8-1 residents and 2.5% of 8-3 residents.



Perceived Benefits

Other Perceived Benefits Cited

6.4% – Equal / greater access to services

6.4% – Unified planning / development

5.8% – The Village would benefit more than the Town outside the Village (ex. by spreading tax burden)

4.7% – Quality of services improve / consistency of services

1.8% – Finally put the merger issue behind us

0.7% – Equal representation in government

0.6% – The Town outside the Village would benefit more than the Village (ex. greater access to services)

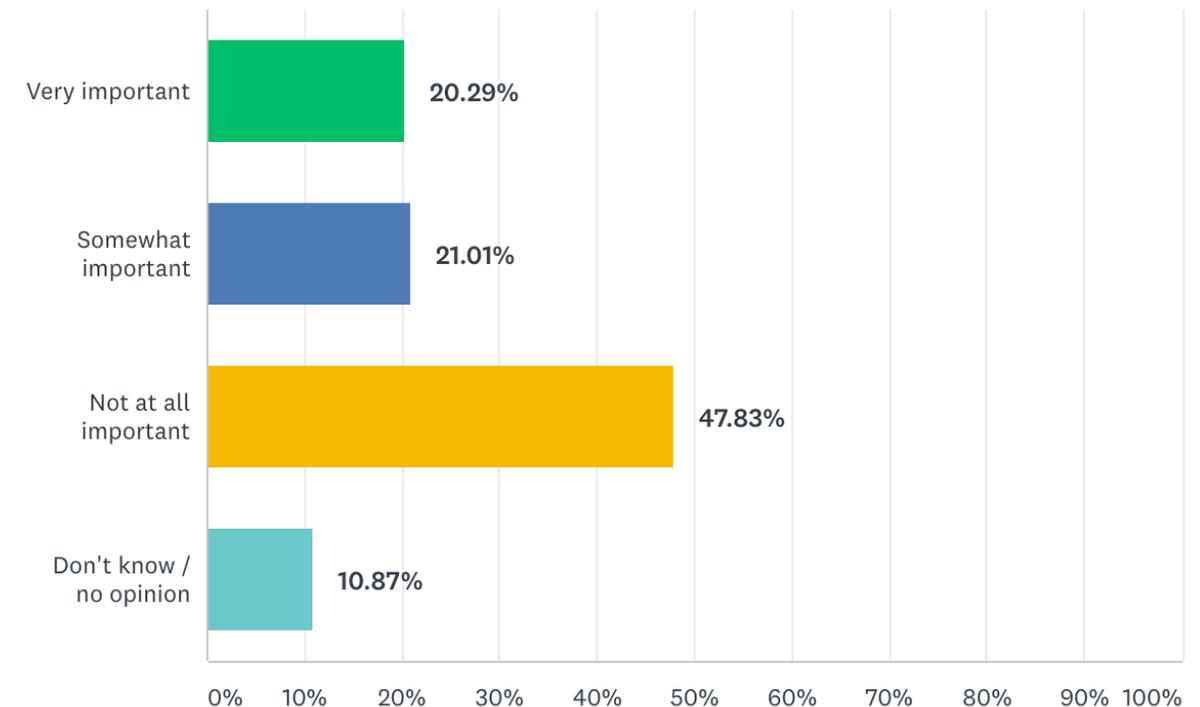


Identity

More Essex residents don't feel the need to retain separate identities for Town and Village

- Almost half of all residents say it is “not at all important” to maintain aspects of separate identities following any potential merger
- However, when analyzing data by voting district, over half of 8-3 residents (54%) say it is at least “somewhat important” to retain aspects of separate identities

Q14 – How important is it to you that the Village of Essex Junction and the Town of Essex retain aspects of separate identities even with a merger of governments?





Identity

Preserving identity is about recognizing unique needs, ensuring representation

“We are not a homogenous community. Each community should be recognized for what it brings to the table, its needs, its concerns, etc.”

“I’ve lived in both the Village and Essex Center; there are very real differences in character and concerns; we have to recognize and celebrate these different perspectives and needs.”

“Since there’s been less and less representation for people living in the Town outside the Village (which a merger would surely exacerbate), keeping separate identities would be a half-measure in acknowledging these people exist.”

“The Village just has a different feel than the Town.”



Identity

Letting go of separate identities has several perceived benefits

Move forward together

“Because holding onto the past is like driving a car and just looking in the rearview mirror. I have lived here since the late 80s and feel like my neighbors are my neighbors, and I don’t care who lives in the ‘town’ versus the ‘village.’ We are all Essex!”

Embrace fairness instead

“Don’t care about identity. Care about fairness and cost reduction. This should be one community.”

Reduce confusion

“I’ve lived in both the Town and the Village a combined 30 years and never understood why they were separate. ... Anyone from outside these areas has no idea about the difference and it’s just confusing.”

Dissolve tension

“The very question promotes ‘us against them.’ I moved to the area in 1965 and have witnessed this everlasting, obscene, and destructive attitude between two communities.”

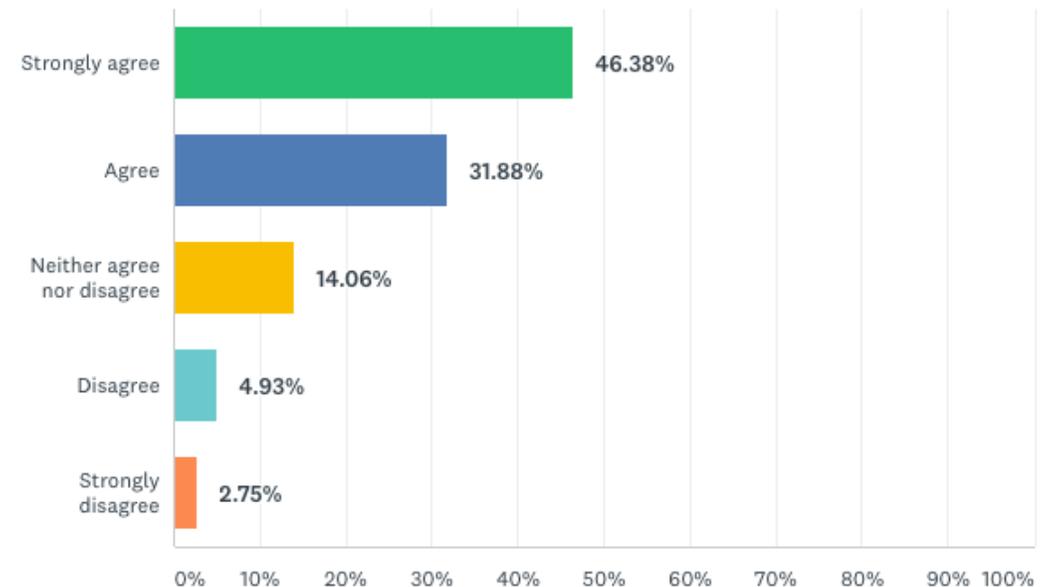


Sharing and Consolidating Services

Nearly 8 in 10 Essex residents agree shared services benefit the community

- Only 8% of Essex residents disagree shared services result in a benefit to the community
- There is no statistically significant difference in response when comparing voting districts
- 52% of 8-3 residents say it is “extremely” or “very” important to continue to share services and functions, compared to 66% of 8-2 residents and 68% of 8-1 residents who say the same

Q7 – To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The Town of Essex and the Village of Essex Junction benefit by having shared services, like a shared police department, shared public works department, shared clerk, and unified municipal manager.





Sharing and Consolidating Services

Essex residents feel all services would improve but would prioritize parks & rec and fire departments for consolidation

Q13 – Which specific services or municipal functions, if any, do you believe would improve if combined? Why? [open-ended]

Service / Function	% of all
All services and functions	27.3%
Parks & recreation	20.3%
Fire department	11.1%
Public works	7.0%
Police	6.1%
Libraries	4.9%
Governance	4.7%
Planning / zoning	4.6%
None	8.5%
Not sure	22.3%

Please note: This was an open-ended question. Percentages above represent the percent of respondents that cited that particular service or function top-of-mind. This list represents the services or functions most frequently cited and not all cited.

All

“ALL will share best practices, cost-savings, lack of duplication, end of the confusion...”

- 8-2 resident

Parks & rec

“It seems like combining all the [recreation] services could result in more and different offerings rather than duplication.”

- 8-3 resident

Fire department

“Both fire and recreation. Each can complement each other and would be a good fit. In the case of fire, maybe significant savings in equipment costs.”

- 8-1 resident



Sharing and Consolidating Services

Village residents are slightly more likely to say parks, fire departments, and libraries should be separate

Q13 – Which specific services or municipal functions, if any, do you believe would be best kept separate? Why do you say this? [open-ended]

Service / Function	% of all	% of 8-1	% of 8-2	% of 8-3
None / All should be together	46.1%	52.8%	45.9%	41.0%
Parks & recreation	10.5%	6.4%	15.6%	9.8%
Libraries	10.8%	7.9%	14.2%	11.5%
Fire department	8.0%	6.8%	10.6%	6.6%

Please note: This was an open-ended question. Percentages above represent the percent of respondents that cited that particular service or function top-of-mind. This list represents the services or functions most frequently cited and not all cited.



Sharing and Consolidating Services

Residents shared perceived drawbacks of combining services and functions



Losing fire department character

“If the community really becomes the 2nd largest in Vermont, how long before we have a single paid fire department with multiple sub-locations? The idea of volunteerism and service will be lost and the efficiency of a merged community will be handed a large increase in fire protection budgets.”

8-2 resident

Some question safety of merging fire depts

“Fire departments should be kept separate just because of logistics. Traffic, train tracks. Could have one governing body but needs to be 2 departments for safety sake.”

8-1 resident

Don't want to lose a library

“The two libraries have unique characteristics. I use them both and recognize the sense of community the smaller library in the town has developed. I'm wondering if merging the two would result in a loss of one of the buildings and services.”

8-3 resident

Fear of losing access

“If Town has equal access to programs at these locations, it might impact the ability of those who live in the Village to be a part of ANY program.”

8-2 resident

Potential de-prioritization of parks & rec

“If the unified municipality prioritized parks and rec services as highly as the Village currently does (or more highly), I would support it. I worry that it could get sidelined in a unified municipality.”

8-2 resident



An Ideal Merger

Most are not sure what an ideal merger looks like; combined services, single governance, and single identity are most often cited

% of all	Description of ideal merger / what it includes
41.7%	Not sure
15.9%	All services combined / remove duplication
13.1%	Singular governance
11.6%	Singular identity / corporation / municipality
8.0%	None / no merger / no ideal merger
4.9%	Equal representation
4.3%	Tax equity
2.4%	Gradual consolidation
2.4%	Lower taxes
2.1%	More than two voting districts to remove us vs. them mentality
1.6%	Dissolve Village charter and become absorbed into Town of Essex
1.5%	Mayoral form with boroughs/districts/wards
1.3%	Status quo / keep as is
1.3%	Partial merger / keep some services separate (ex. library, rec, fire)
1.3%	Needs of residents in all parts of Essex addressed thoughtfully
1.2%	At-large / no districts
1.2%	Timely merger / just get it over with
1.2%	Effectively communicated / engagement with residents to share merger plans/data

- Many residents cited a benefit of a singular governing structure, but there wasn't consensus on how that would be comprised (all at-large seats vs. neighborhood representation; even vs. odd numbers, tiebreaking)
- Equal representation is a key part of an ideal merger for 8-3 residents – 9.8% cited this, compared to 5.7% for 8-1 and 2.3% for 8-2
- 8% of all residents said there is no ideal merger or that there shouldn't be a merger



Takeaways & Recommendations





Takeaways & Recommendations

The following slides outline the takeaways and recommendations for future research phases – the upcoming focus groups and second resident survey to be launched in September 2019.

Representation, tax equity, and identity were key themes, which we knew going in

- Many residents recognize, no matter what, they want fairness in how the community is governed, but there was no clear consensus on what fair or equal representation means – we recommend probing on different models: equal representation, proportional representation, at-large, combination, etc. to understand pros/cons and preferences
- About half said retaining identity was not all that important but it came up often in open-ended responses – we recommend further probing on the importance of identity and how aspects of historical identities may or may not complement a new, singular identity for the community
- Residents of each voting district prioritize these issues differently – we recommend focus group recruitment to include a filter for voting district, so that Town outside the Village participants include a mix of both 8-1 and 8-3 residents

Takeaways & Recommendations

Some respondents had a hard time conceptualizing or visualizing a potential merger and weren't confident in their responses

- In some instances, people responded to open ended prompts with “you tell us what this will look like” or “I don't have enough information to form an opinion”
- Future phases of research should include visuals of potential governing models, bullet-pointed lists of potential benefits/perceived challenges, lists/examples of what is already combined and what is being proposed – anything that would make it easy and plain-spoken
- Because of the open-ended nature of the questions, for example, some assumed consolidating/ combining services implied closing of certain facilities (fire stations, libraries) while others assumed facilities could remain open but were governed by one body – we recommend that future research gauge opinions using more concrete plans and having everyone evaluate options using the same information

Takeaways & Recommendations

Residents request that discussions are out in the open, ideas are clearly presented with examples, and communication is disseminated often and through multiple channels

- A few commented on “sneaky, backdoor” attempts at consolidating services or lack of outreach in previous attempts, resulting in poor engagement and distrust
- One resident cited the Thoughtful Growth In Action initiative and suggested open workshops, roundtables, coffee chats, and a comprehensive communication plan to encourage more resident collaboration
- Some also mentioned the need for data to “prove out” potential savings or efficiencies – when data exists, we should leverage that information, if not in the planned research, then in any resident education around the topic of potentially merging
- Future research should seek to understand how residents would prefer to be kept abreast of the merger discussion, what information would be most valuable, and if they have a desire to attend workshops or other similar open forums



Takeaways & Recommendations

The issue of how quickly to execute a potential merger was brought up

- Some residents advocated for a gradual, methodical roll-out to take place over a number of years, with services and functions being combined one at a time
- Others preferred a “rip the Band-Aid off” approach where consolidation occurs quickly or all at once as a way to put an end to long-simmering tensions
- Future research should gauge preferences on the timeline for execution, should a merger occur, to understand the preference among residents



Takeaways & Recommendations

Cultural differences and an “us vs. them” perception was a persistent theme

- Residents recognize the specific needs and characteristics of their communities and neighborhoods, leading to both unique experiences but also division and tension
- Most of the differences seem to arise from the differences between rural and urban settings and lifestyles
- Future research should have residents examine proposed merger options through a cultural lens, determining whether certain options do a better job alleviating cultural tension than others



Next Steps

KSV:

- Share research data set, including open-ended responses, tabulations, and comparative data – Monday, 7/22
- Develop first draft of focus group discussion guide – Wednesday, 7/24

Essex:

- Provide additional comments, questions, and feedback on survey findings
- Provide potential language / merger model options to include in focus group testing – is EOD Monday, 7/22 possible?

All:

- Review draft of focus group discussion guide – Friday, 7/26 8:00am



Thank You

