

To: Selectboard Members of the Town of Essex, Vermont
Essex Town Managers Office
81 Main Street, Essex Jct., VT 05452

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Re.: Summary Notes from “Town of Essex Public Forums” held on August 4th, August 6th, and August 21st 2021 regarding: “How to prepare for the Village of Essex Junction’s upcoming separation vote and subsequent VT Legislative decision on the creation of an independent City of Essex Junction. *Notes from 8/21/21 are added in red font.*”

See Also: *Event Materials Prepared by the Town of Essex*

- *Event Flyer*
- *Event Handout*
- *Attendance Report(s) via Microsoft Teams Reports & Paper Sign In*

Discussion Prompt: What are you paying attention to during this interim phase?
(Ex. Level of Services, Cost of Services, Other?)

- A) Retaining childcare, afterschool, enrichment opportunities that have been available in current environment**
- Affordability. *Will cost go up?*
 - Availability as a town resident. *Don’t want to have to compete. This is an essential service. What options will be left if separation goes through? I’m hoping to preserve alignment of these two departments & expand services; my children attend programs at both in order to make our child care coverage / situation work.*
 - PREDICTABILITY. How much notice will people have if there are significant changes to availability / affordability / accessibility? *ToV residents don’t need another “what if” re options for camps and childcare. Need to be able to plan in collaboration with work commitments etc. It is a real concern that availability will diminish.*
 - **Expansion. Looking for increased child care services (not just retaining current level).**

B) Retaining experience with Parks & Recreation

- How will our experience of programming and parks change? *Presence, availability, price – this was a welcoming element of living here / moving here. Worried that these things will be compromised. Cost of accessing services / parks*
- Access to Indian Brook / Saxon (shared park spaces)

C) Potential Tax Increases / Budgeting

- Looking for reliable information about what tax changes are likely.
 - *Would be helpful to have scenarios / better information about the implications of removing 42% of tax base ...for town ...and for village.*
 - *A framework that would help the public think about these options / trade-offs (even if specifics are not available) would be helpful. Looking for ways to support a more level-headed discussion rather than what feels like an emotional debate and/or an abundance of speculation.*
- Very worried about property taxes going up. *This will be VERY difficult for everybody. (How will this affect affordable housing? Residents with fixed income? Who is advocating for these points of view?)*
- Cost of staff / shared staff / expenses – how to anticipate how this would change? ***Paying attention (and wary of) any big budget changes during this Interim Phase.***
- *Watching the Budget Process for Public Works, Fire Dept.s during this interim phase .*

D) Concern: How discourse takes place regarding this issue

- How to ensure accurate information?
- How to stay engaging? *Concern that drama disengages & people will not be informed. The way we (as a community) engage this topic impacts how people may think about Essex – worried they will disengage, choose not to live here, etc.*
- How to reframe this discussion/process so that it is increasingly open for input, exchanges, discussion?
 - *At the moment, the swapping of proposals is leaving limited opportunity to explore options / consider options as a community.*
 - *How might we increase options for **community building** discussions? “Public to Be Heard” is not the most effective venue for exchange. Example: offer chances to speak with SB reps (maybe 2 at a time) to gather and discuss – modeled after “coffee chats”*
- How do we make decisions collectively? *More of a say in how separation occurs.*
- What can be learned / gleaned from “Separation & Share”? *Take a second look at these recommendations.*
- Concerned that discourse is more divisive than it needs to be, particularly with the manner in which residents and elected officials characterize proposals and swap considerations. *Example - framing “proposals” as “demands.”*
 - *Hoping that neighbors are not “characterizing” neighbors.*

- *“Be kind – we may be walking in each others’ shoes at some point”*
- *See frustration as a signal that there are concerns / questions / urgency – seek to understand, rather than characterize or attribute intent.*

E) Communication could be improved (Feedback for the Selectboard):

- Please increase communication with the public, transparency. *Seeking opportunities to have more dialogue about these topics / this transitional time & process. Wish for the public information network to have good, reliable information. Looking for roactive, creative ways to inform town residents (especially those who do not want to get info from social media).*
- Concerned with how social media network disrupts accurate exchanges. *Is there a way to counter this? How to balance with good information and accurate signals about direction / tone / developments as planning goes forward. Looking for an increase in good information / facts and advertise where to get it – it is tough to know what is really going on without a “Clearing House” of reliable information.*
- Communication between the Boards is most important thing right now. *Signal that this taking place.*
- Would like to hear more from the Selectboard – looking for an accurate message about ongoing efforts, developments, challenges.
 - *Are there ways to build in predictable, iterative opportunities to correct information / give information / Q&A – particularly on common misperceptions (i.e. a dedicated time during SB meetings?)*
 - *Increase communication about the way that services work and how they are funded – this is complicated information – how to get better understanding about the rationale behind discrepancies (example Town & Village sidewalks)*
 - *“Best to overcommunicate than not communicate at all” – hopes that this would counter misinformation.*
- **Would be helpful to hear what topics the executive sessions are covering, even if the details cannot always be disclosed. *ie. What can SB let the public know? And then share!*** *Paying attention to the number of executive sessions that are happening. Confusing / tricky to follow developments – may be missing input. Attention to equitable representation.*

F) Representation

- How to ensure that ToV residents' views are fully represented / considered DURING INTERIM PHASE. *Concern is that there is over representation of village views – which may drive direction of considerations. Current representation structure dilutes ToV vote.*
- What options could be set up for the interim phase to increase representation / to inform planning? *An Advisory Committee (ie. include folks from dense areas, suburbs, rural etc. – outside the village only residents)? **A small citizen committee to research options / proposals and bring to elected officials for review and vetting?** Note: any accommodations that may be provided to ToV also be provided to V residents and visa versa.*
- Current ToV is not monolithic – representation model needs to take this into account.
 - *Representation cannot be “at large” – everyone is elected town wide but there are very different areas of the town (consider options like Ward Gov etc.).*
 - *“Other areas outside of the village do not have the ability to uniquely weigh in based on its specific needs.”*
- Paying attention to how Board(s) take into account and reflect input from focus groups and the community. *Note: this is on-going and spans many topics of interest, not just the separation.*

G) Service Availability:

- What will the impact be on services (like sidewalks plowing) if separation goes through?
- **How complicated will it be to request updates / adjustments / services as needed or when gaps are noticed – particularly during this interim period?**
- **How are merged services being distributed between Village / Town during this interim phase? *Always evaluating what is available, when it is available, fairness / equity between two entities.***

H) Policing:

- Please do not stall on deciding how these services will be provided / organized (planning for interim and planning for future phases). *Bring definition and make the best decision for now, knowing that adjustments may be needed in the future.*
- Hoping for shared police services with both municipalities. *Concerned with discourse about the alternatives, if did not share police services. What can be ensured during this interim phase so that residents know what to expect in future?*

I) Culture:

- How do we take care of every single person in this community? *...during Interim Phases and beyond.*
- What are our collective values / ethics? How does our government reflect our community and visa versa?
- “Civility.” Concerned about the Village vs ToV tenor – want to feel welcome in both spaces!
- How to counter perceived conflict between “ToV” “Village”? *How to change the way that this debate takes place? Can it be less divisive, polarizing? ...can we still demonstrate and provide a welcoming community climate / place to live?*

J) How negotiation of issues related to the Separation / Independence takes place

- Looking for clarity from SB about when contractual changes / agreements are to be negotiated.
- Looking for active development / planning / engagement about what ToV residents might be facing if separation goes through
- Wary of making changes during the interim period
- Plan for a successful outcome if separation *does* take place, whether or not separation takes place! *“Separate & Share” referenced several times - giving attention to shared services pre/post separation.*
- Remain mindful of how the “interim” phase looks different depending on whether someone lives in the Village or the ToV. Seeking good information about conditions post VT Legislative vote in order to develop options and understand what impacts these options would have.

K) Bigger Picture

- There are so many other critical pieces of work to pick up (Climate change, etc.) – would like to the committee work that is moving forward be included on Selectboard Agenda. *Acknowledgment: the separation process takes so much bandwidth. But seeing progress of committee work on the agenda brings visibility, engagement, alignment.*
- *Worried that prolonged limbo works against Essex in drawing talent / energy / availability to work on bigger issues that will affect future generations.*

Discussion Prompt: What questions do you have?

1. Tax Base – what are implications of losing this as a town resident? (Worried about desirability to move here)
2. Cost of staff / shared staff / expenses – ways to anticipate how this would change?
What ways might the cost of shared services be allocated between two separate entities? (what makes sense? 50/50? Other percentage? What formula is fair?)
3. What would happen to these services if separation happens? What preparations are being made if this takes place? Looking to anticipate impacts:
 - Childcare
 - Seasons Passes
 - Guardrails, Sidewalk Maintenance
4. Are there agreements / swaps that could be made?
5. If separation doesn't succeed, what options are being explored for equalization?
6. Is there a unified approach in leading up to the Vermont Legislative Decision? (increase the possibility of success)
7. How does this interim period affect people who provide services to the community (positions like Justice of the Peace, setting up Town Meeting, Elections)? Could this be a detail that is added to the Charter Proposal? *Partial Answer provided – no changes occur until effective date per the State Legislature.*
8. Option/Possibility: How many ToV entities could be supported by the Highway Tax?
9. Are there creative options / proposals developed during this interim phase that would durable, useful and transferrable whether or not separation passes? *Example: Fair Representation*
10. Where may people send comments / input about separation? *Send to Evan*
11. Note: these names / definitions of geographies is problematic (Center, Village, ToV, Junction, etc.) Are there alternative approaches to how we refer to these areas? How to deconstruct these terms as they impact how people relate to the issue / to each other.
12. *Why are we still planning on “merging” / “shared services” during this interim phase if ultimate goal is separation? What signal is this sending?*

13. REQUEST: can we get more specific information on what to expect in different scenarios. Looking for education about what the options / implications would be – how will this effect each person: Taxes, Budget, Services (needs assessment in different potential environments)
14. How will interim arrangements / shared services be voted on (this is also a representation Q)?
15. REQUEST: Prioritize clarity about decisions and changes that are being considered re. public safety and public health.
16. Why is this separation issue (which seemed so simple – one shared service -Police) getting so complicated? *“Please help simplify.”*
17. What adjustments are possible with the **time frame** of this separation process in order to increase opportunities for community members to educate themselves, review information, exchange thoughts, ensure informed decision making?