



ESSEX RESIDENT SURVEY ON POTENTIAL MERGER (SEPT/OCT 2019)

Key Findings Report

October 29, 2019

Background & Research Objectives

KSV was engaged by the Town of Essex and Village of Essex Junction municipal governments to facilitate a series of research activities to gather resident feedback on the question of whether to merge the two municipal governments into a single, unified municipality.

This has been an iterative process in which we started with a resident survey that was in the field in July 2019. That mostly qualitative, open-ended survey helped inform the development of the discussion guides for a series of listening sessions which took place in August 2019 with residents from across the community. In those listening sessions, participants provided feedback on several proposed, high-level representation models and taxation structures for a potential merger, while also discussing the pros and cons of keeping status quo.

Findings from those two qualitative phases of research led to the development of this latest survey in which we aimed to validate and quantify the key findings and themes uncovered related to perceived challenges or perceived benefits of potential merger options. An additional goal of the survey was to determine if there was a favorite proposal for merger among residents – or a desire to keep the status quo.

Output from these research activities is intended to provide information that will aid the Town of Essex Selectboard and Village of Essex Junction Board of Trustees while considering and making decisions on this issue.

The final survey upon which this report is based was in the field from September 16 through October 20, 2019. The link to the survey was distributed online by Town and Village officials through municipal websites, social media accounts, Front Porch Forum, email lists, the Essex Reporter and as a paper survey at municipal locations.

This report summarizes the highlights, key findings, and KSV's takeaways from the survey. A more detailed look at the survey data can be found in our cross-tabulation of the data.



Which part of Essex:

- 52.49% – Town outside the Village
- 47.51% – Village of Essex Junction

Voting District:

- 34.24% – District 8-1
- 40.88% – District 8-2
- 18.36% – District 8-3
- 5.09% – Not sure of district
- 1.42% – Not registered to vote

N = 844

Respondent Characteristics

We received 844 total responses from the Essex community, and this represented a mix across geographies, voting districts, and demographics. The split between the Town outside the Village and the Village of Essex Junction is close to the 50-50 population split.

Additionally, three-quarters of respondents (75.83%) indicate they’ve lived in Essex for 10 or more years, making it likely they were around the last time this issue was debated and put up for a vote. This echoes our experience with the

listening sessions on this topic, where most of the participants that took part were very familiar with the history of the merger debate and passionate about where they stand on this issue.

General Attitudes Toward Potential Merger

At present, slightly less than half of all Essex residents surveyed (48.46%) say they are generally in favor of merging the municipal governments of the Town of Essex and the Village of Essex Junction. Residents in the Village are more likely to support merger, with nearly two-thirds saying they’re in favor.

Residents of the Town outside the Village are divided on their support for merger — District 8-1 is twice as likely to be in favor compared to District 8-3 — but overall less than half of all TOV residents say they’re generally in favor. A majority of 8-3 residents (54.84%) oppose merger.

	TOTAL	Voting District			Time Lived in Essex	
		8-1	8-2	8-3	Less than 10 yrs.	10 or more yrs.
	N = 844	N = 289	N = 345	N = 155	N = 204	N = 640
Generally in favor	48.46%	44.29%	64.93%	20.65%	54.41%	46.56%
Undecided	18.13%	19.03%	13.62%	24.52%	21.57%	17.03%
Generally opposed	33.41%	36.68%	21.45%	54.84%	24.02%	36.41%

The survey also finds that Essex residents that have lived in the community 10 or more years are less likely to be in favor of merger and more likely to be opposed to merger. As we learned in the listening sessions, the history of this issue is still present, and some believe this issue has



already been decided — 4 in 10 of those opposed to merger (N = 282) say they don't favor it because the citizens voted "no" in 2007.

In addition to those that lean one way or the other, about 1 in 5 residents are still undecided and represent a tipping point between merger approval or merger disapproval by the community.

Why would you say you are generally in favor of merger? (Top 4)

- 77.26% – I believe we would be a stronger, more unified community if it were a single municipality
- 73.11% – I believe municipal services would be improved if they are paid for and managed with the whole community in mind
- 69.68% – I believe it could ultimately result in tax equalization across the entire Town of Essex
- 58.92% – I believe it's time to make it happen once and for all

N = 409

Why Some Residents Favor Merger – Unity, Service Improvements, Equal Tax Rate

Of the respondents that are in favor of merger (N = 409), nearly 8 in 10 say they're in favor because it would unify the community, making it stronger.

"Strength [in] numbers. We would be one community, finally. It is what we teach our kid to do, get along with each other." – Village resident

Those in favor also believe it could lead to an improvement in municipal services.

Seven in 10 of those in favor of merger support the idea because it could lead to tax equalization. Village residents in support of merger were more likely to cite this (78.6% of them did) compared to TOV residents (54.61%).

"[I] think it will lead to better governance and hopefully bring some cost savings. I also think it will be less confusing and less divisive." – TOV

(District 8-1) resident

Ten percent of respondents cited some benefits other than the answer choices given. One of the most common responses was a perception that merger would result in municipal efficiencies and eliminate cost redundancies. This was also a top benefit mentioned in the first, open-ended survey that was fielded in July, however, discussion in the listening sessions revealed skepticism as to whether additional cost savings through consolidation are actually achievable. Essex residents should be provided with information that sets proper expectations on potential future savings as a result of merger.



Why Some Residents Oppose Merger – Tax Increases, Concern Over Unfair or Unequal Representation, Distrust in Officials

Nearly two-thirds of those opposed to merger are against it because of concerns over tax increases. It has been stated in public meetings and on the survey itself that a merger would likely result in an increase in tax rate for TOV residents. As a result, 84.26% of TOV residents that are against merger (N = 197) are concerned about seeing a tax increase, compared to 23.53% of Village residents that say the same.

Over half of Village residents that are against merger (N = 85) say they're against it because they don't like the way some services have already been consolidated, making it the second biggest concern (after "more negative consequences than benefits"). We heard concerns over "back room merger" in listening sessions that included both Village and TOV residents, but this survey showed that Village residents were more concerned — only 26.9% of TOV residents opposed to merger said this was a concern. Regardless, it is imperative that all plans related to merger and consolidation of services take place out in the open with public input heard.

"I don't trust current officials - elected or hired employees. If they want something, they set the ball in motion behind closed doors, and then taxpayers are the last to find out the details. If someone ask questions or expresses concern, they're being 'negative' and the [Facebook] warriors shame them. The controlled narrative set forth is alarming." – TOV (District 8-1) resident

Nearly 17% of those opposed to merger cited some reason other than the answer choices given. A few perceive that all or most of the benefits of merger would go to the Village and not the Town.

"The village has nothing to lose, no place for expansion but up, or replace existing buildings. The town has everything to lose. Why destroy something that works very well." – TOV (District 8-1) resident

Why would you say you are generally opposed to merger? (Top 4)

- 65.96% – I'm concerned it could mean my taxes going up
- 56.38% – I believe there are more negative consequences than benefits
- 54.61% – I'm concerned it could result in a governing body that doesn't fairly or equally represent all residents in the community
- 42.20% – The citizens voted "no" the last time the question was on the ballot in 2007

N = 282



There is also a sentiment of distrust in the current governing boards, exacerbated by the perception that the current make-up of the two governing boards leads to more favorability toward Village concerns.

“This merger is being strong-armed by the 8 [of] 10 Town/Village leaders whose constituents are really their Village neighbors who want lower taxes because they like to spend and lost IBM.” – TOV (District 8-3) resident

This also leads to the perception that information and commentary provided by the municipal governments have been one-sided in favor of merger. This survey itself was not immune to feedback where some perceived it as a “push poll” to support merger, despite our efforts to remain objective and allow all residents to share thoughts on options being considered, regardless of whether they currently support merger, oppose merger, or remain undecided.

“Information distributed and presented so far has only shown the plus side of the story and feels more like a pro-merger ad campaign.” – TOV (District 8-3) resident

“I do not appreciate the recent communications from community leaders supporting the merger that seem dismissive of citizens of both Town and Village as being ignorant. This has eroded my trust in any of these leaders and their messaging.” – Village resident

Every piece of communication on the topic of merger will be under a microscope. Evaluate communication for potential bias and eliminate it. Acknowledge the legitimate concerns residents have with merger, which include tax increases and representation models, and work with them to find common ground.

Why Some Residents are Undecided – Need More Details, See Both Sides

Nearly 1 in 5 Essex residents (18.13%) are currently undecided when it comes to merger. District 8-3 residents are the most likely to be undecided on merger — 24.52% are undecided compared to 19.03% of District 8-1 residents and 13.62% of District 8-2 residents.

Seven in 10 of those that are undecided (N = 159) say they would need to see what the proposed plan for a merger would look like before making a decision. This was a common theme we heard in the listening sessions, and even when shown information that included potential governing board representation structures and the current difference in tax rates that



would need to be addressed if a single tax rate were to be achieved, respondents asked for specifics in order to provide a more informed opinion.

“I need to understand the details of expected costs and benefits.” – TOV (District 8-3) resident
“It seems unclear what the pros and cons are for both Village and Town residents.” – TOV (District 8-3) resident

Some like the idea in theory, but without detail around potential benefits, they remain on the fence.

“It's hard to know who to believe. Recent school mergings don't seem to have saved money and are certainly not elevating student performance. ‘Merging’ seems like a great idea, but what are the measurable benefits? How will we know whether it lived up to its promise? Can we return if the merger isn't what we anticipated?” – Village resident

Others indicate that their support or non-support would hinge on what is decided for a governance model and taxation structure.

“I need to see what the new governance model might look like and have a clear understanding of how a merger would affect my tax rate.” – TOV (District 8-1) resident

The undecided in this case are not completely uninformed, rather, they simply require more information to evaluate before they can make a decision. Should the process move forward toward a potential vote on merger, we imagine that, once decisions are made regarding governance structure, taxation impacts, and identity, more and more undecided voters will make their decision. Later on in this report, we get a sense of which options would lead to support for merger and which would lead to not supporting merger.



Representation

Representation is a key issue at the heart of the question of whether to merge and, as such, has been a key focus of these research efforts.

As we did in the listening sessions, this survey presented three governance model options for respondents to consider — a governing body with all members elected at-large, a governing body in which all representatives are elected from a district or ward, and a governing body that would feature a combination of at-large and district/ward-based representatives. Descriptions of each model were also presented with pros and cons of each approach, sourced from the National League of Cities, to enable respondents to provide a more informed opinion.

For each option, we asked whether respondents would agree or disagree with having that representation model — essentially what would residents be OK with in terms of governance structure. The intention was to force a choice in order to better determine which representation structures would be most favorable to Essex residents.

	Present Attitude Toward Merger				Voting District		
	TOTAL	In favor	Undecided	Opposed	8-1	8-2	8-3
	N = 844	N = 409	N = 153	N = 282	N = 289	N = 345	N = 155
At Large Only							
Agree	50.95%	71.39%	49.02%	22.34%	49.48%	58.26%	32.90%
Disagree	49.05%	28.61%	50.98%	77.66%	50.52%	41.74%	67.10%
Districts/Wards Only							
Agree	62.44%	45.97%	66.67%	84.04%	62.98%	55.65%	76.77%
Disagree	37.56%	54.03%	33.33%	15.96%	37.02%	44.35%	23.23%
Combination of At-Large/Wards							
Agree	35.31%	42.79%	39.22%	22.34%	32.53%	39.13%	29.68%
Disagree	64.69%	57.21%	60.78%	77.66%	67.47%	60.87%	70.32%

Overall, Essex residents are more favorable toward a district-/ward-based representation, with residents across the community — but in particular TOV residents — indicating an acceptance of that model.



Those that are generally in favor of merger (N = 409), however, are more likely to support an at-large structure. Given that those in favor of merger are seeking a more unified community, an at-large structure is seen as a way of eliminating divisions, whether those divisions are real or perceived.

Resident Thoughts on At-Large Representation

For what reasons do you <u>agree</u> with having a governing body where all members are elected at-large? (Top 3)	For what reasons do you <u>disagree</u> with having a governing body where all members are elected at-large? (Top 3)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 74.60% – I believe we’re all one community, one Essex, and this would remove perceived Town/Village separation • 58.50% – I believe the elected members would do a better job serving the entire community and not just their district • 47.62% – I believe all of Essex would be more fairly represented <p>N = 441</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 66.83% – I would be concerned representation would not be fair or equal • 66.35% – I’m more in favor of district/ward style representation rather than at-large • 61.06% – I would be concerned that issues specific to my part of Essex would be minimized or ignored <p>N = 416</p>

Those in favor of an at-large representation structure (N = 441) like it mostly for the perception that it could unite the community under one banner of one Essex and eliminate any lines of separation.

“Geographic-based elections lead to partisan politics, which is exactly what the Essex community as a whole does not need today or tomorrow.” – Village resident

Nearly half of those in favor of at-large representation say it would lead to all of Essex being more fairly represented.



However, what’s fair or equal for one resident may be viewed as unfair or unequal for another. Two-thirds of those that are not in favor of at-large representation (N = 416) would be concerned that representation would *not* be fair or equal under an at-large structure.

“History shows that the board has been dominated by one district or another over time.” – TOV (District 8-1) resident

“Under At-Large, it is possible for one small area of the community to have most of the elected officials, thereby not reflecting other areas of the sprawling Essex area.” – TOV (District 8-1) resident

Resident Thoughts on District/Ward Representation

For what reasons do you <u>agree</u> with having a governing body where representatives come from districts/wards? (Top 3)	For what reasons do you <u>disagree</u> with having a governing body where representatives come from districts/wards? (Top 3)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 81.44% – I believe all parts of Essex would be more fairly represented • 65.53% – I believe the issues pertaining to my specific part of Essex would be better addressed • 57.39% – I believe it would bring diverse perspectives to serve all of Essex <p>N = 528</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 68.24% – I’m concerned such a structure would result in representatives only serving the interests of the residents in their district rather than all of Essex • 67.30% – I’m concerned it would divide the community • 61.32% – I’m more in favor of an at-large representation structure <p>N = 318</p>

A district- or ward-based system is seen by proponents as a solution to address the concerns in the community around fair or equal representation, and to ensure that the unique needs across the community are better addressed.

However, even those in favor of such a model caution that it could perpetuate TOV and Village divides unless wards are created by rethinking existing Village and TOV lines.



“Still very concerned that this will create an us against them atmosphere similar to what we have now. The districts would have to wipe out old Village/Town boundaries to be effective.” – Village resident

Those opposed to this structure believe it may result in representatives being too focused on their ward’s concerns rather than the community as a whole.

Others don’t like this structure because of the relatively small size of Essex.

“I’m not sure our combined population is large enough to warrant this kind of structure, concerned it may amplify the perception of the kind of Town/Village division that already exists.” – Village resident

Resident Thoughts on a Combination of At-Large and District/Ward Representation

For what reasons do you <u>agree</u> with having a governing body where there is a combination of at-large and district/ward representatives? (Top 3)	For what reasons do you <u>disagree</u> with having a governing body where there is a combination of at-large and district/ward representatives? (Top 4)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 78.19% – I believe it would be a balanced approach where local concerns are heard and addressed while the perspective of the entire community is kept in mind • 61.74% – I believe it would be a nice compromise between those that feel strongly about having either at-large representation or district/ward representation • 8.05% – Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 41.76% – I would rather have a district/ward structure • 40.48% – It sounds complicated • 32.60% – I would rather have an at-large structure • 29.12% – I believe it would favor more populous areas of the community
<p>N = 298</p>	<p>N = 546</p>

Those who would support a mixed approach like it for the perceived balance it could provide.



“I like to think that this would provide a voice for the districts, though with potential for increased in-fighting, but with the at-large body, there could still be traction for forward movement. You don't want to ignore the districts with the big picture POV all the time. District inputs will provide a check and balance to the big picture and may also prompt perspectives that weren't otherwise thought of.” – TOV (District 8-3) resident

Some, perhaps somewhat cynically, see it as a way to appease as many people as possible in the merger debate.

“Just to ‘sell’ the idea of a merger for once and for all.” – Village resident

Four in 10 of those who are opposed to a combination of at-large and ward-based seats would see such a governing body as being too complicated and one in which there may not be enough candidates to support competitive elections. Another concern voiced is whether the at-large portion of the governing body would be seen as having more authority or status over the district portion.

“Because within boards that have such structure there is a tendency to treat district members as second tier members (my election is worth more than yours) making the boards ineffective.” – TOV (District 8-3) resident

Ranking the Representation Options

The table below shows a weighted average representing how respondents ranked the three representation options against each other. The higher the weighted average, the higher the rank.

Q. Please rank your preference for which representation structure you would prefer in a merged municipality.

	Attitude Toward Merger				Voting District		
	TOTAL N = 844	In favor N = 409	Undecided N = 153	Opposed N = 282	8-1 N = 289	8-2 N = 345	8-3 N = 155
At-large only	1.80	2.10	1.75	1.40	1.78	1.93	1.51
District/wards only	2.11	1.78	2.12	2.58	2.13	1.97	2.41
Combination	2.09	2.12	2.12	2.02	2.09	2.10	2.08

This table shows that preferences lean toward a district-/ward-based representation model or a combination of at-large and district-/ward-representation, and it is very close.



What would residents vote for?

	TOTAL	Present Attitude Toward Merger			Voting District		
		In favor	Undecided	Oppose	8-1	8-2	8-3
	N = 844	N = 409	N = 153	N = 282	N = 289	N = 345	N = 155
Would Vote “Yes” (Multiple Selection)							
Single municipality w/at-large only	34.60%	59.41%	26.80%	2.84%	30.80%	46.09%	16.13%
Single municipality w/wards only	29.98%	40.34%	35.95%	11.70%	29.07%	35.94%	22.58%
Single municipality w/combination	38.63%	61.86%	38.56%	4.96%	34.95%	48.99%	20.65%
Would not support any merger	30.09%	0.00%	16.34%	81.21%	33.91%	17.10%	51.61%
Some other option for merger	9.83%	1.22%	18.30%	17.73%	9.69%	8.70%	14.19%
Top Choice (Select One)							
Single municipality w/at-large only	26.42%	44.99%	21.57%	2.13%	25.61%	31.59%	15.48%
Single municipality w/wards only	18.25%	22.49%	27.45%	7.09%	19.72%	18.55%	16.77%
Single municipality w/combination	21.56%	31.78%	27.45%	3.55%	18.69%	27.83%	11.61%
Would not support any merger	26.18%	0.00%	11.76%	71.99%	29.41%	14.78%	44.52%
Some other option for merger	7.58%	0.73%	11.76%	15.25%	6.57%	7.25%	11.61%



Toward the end of the survey, respondents were asked which of the high-level proposals (single municipality paired with a governing body option) they would vote in favor of or whether they would not support any merger proposal or would rather have some other option for merger. They were first asked to select all of the options they would vote for, following up with a question that asked what their top choice would be — including options to not vote for any merge proposal or to suggest an alternative.

First, we need to acknowledge the difference between responding to a survey question with high-level, hypothetical information compared to an actual vote based on a fully fleshed out proposal for a potential merger option. As we have recognized previously, residents are hungry for more detailed information to form a more definitive opinion.

Given present information, 3 in 10 of all residents would not support *any* merger proposal that was suggested. A third of those surveyed in District 8-1 and half from District 8-3 say they would not support any merger proposal.

Nearly 10% indicated they would prefer some other option for merger, which we asked them to specify, though a number of respondents filled in this box by stating they need more information before evaluating any merger option.

There were 34 responses mentioning some form of separation of the two municipalities, with some advocating for a continued sharing of services such as the police force — “a friendly separation.” This accounted for approximately 4% of all survey responses.

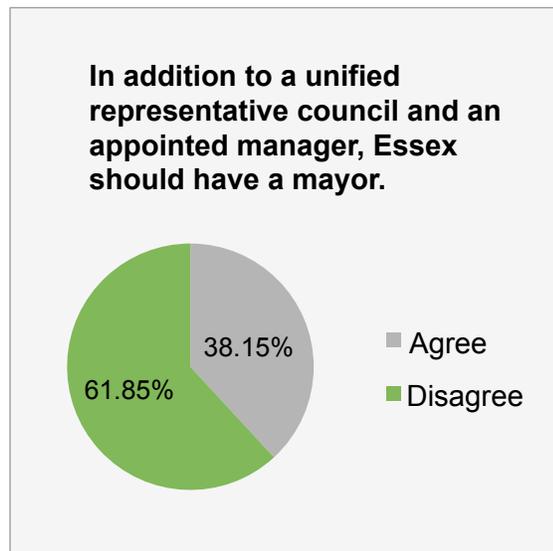
That means 6 in 10 residents saying they would support at least one of the merger options considered in this survey.

Interestingly, we see the option getting the most support is the one with the combination of at-large and district-/ward-based representatives. Our hypothesis is that those generally in favor of merger and those on the fence are seeing this as a best-of-both-worlds or a balanced approach that would satisfy more people than if the governing body were one or the other. However, it is not anyone’s top choice when given the option to choose.

We also recognize that some of those generally in favor of merger wouldn’t support just any proposal put in front of them. That group is more likely to support an option that contains at-large representatives — either solely at-large or in combination with district-/ward-based seats — more so than they would support a solely district-/ward-based model. Again, earlier findings indicate those in favor of merger strive for more unity and they may feel that at-large representation is the best way to become a united community.



We also see those that generally oppose merger would be willing to consider a merger if it came with a governing body featuring only district-/ward-based seats. Just over 10% of those generally opposed to merger would consider voting in favor of that proposal. This helps us quantify a sentiment we heard in the listening sessions in which those that are concerned about merger would be willing to trade an increase in tax rate if that meant a model that guarantees representation from their neighborhood, district, or ward.



Mayor

One of the areas in which residents across the community are somewhat aligned is on the prospect of having an elected mayor — a majority (61.85%) do not believe Essex should have an elected mayor in addition to having a unified representative council and an appointed town manager.

Two-thirds of residents opposed to a mayor indicate that they would rather have people that are interested in running for public office in Essex serve on the Town council rather than pursue mayorship. Almost a third (31.03%) of those opposed to an Essex mayor say that they would be

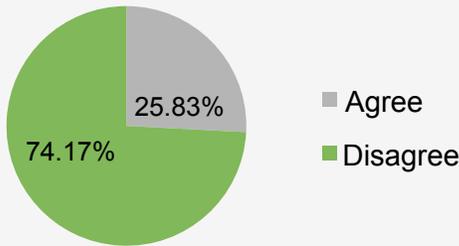
concerned a potential mayor wouldn't have much power to do anything anyway.

Many others mentioned that the idea of a mayor would add another potentially costly and unnecessary layer of government.

Of those in favor of a mayor (N = 323), 8 in 10 believe a mayor would be an effective voice advocating for Essex at the state level.



Municipal budgets should continue to be voted on by a voice vote during Annual Meetings rather than through Australian (paper) ballot voting.



Municipal Budget Voting

Another area in which residents across the community are mostly aligned is on the topic of how municipal budgets should be voted on — nearly three-quarters (74.17%) of residents disagree with continuing to vote on municipal budgets during Annual Meetings.

Of those that disagree, 86.28% indicate they would rather have more people be able to have a say in the budget and believe Australian ballot would accommodate that. Also, 85.65% say that they don't believe those that are able to attend annual meetings represent the entire community.

“Without absentee ballots we disenfranchise many voters: lower income who have difficulty scheduling a meeting, people on night shifts like nurses, the retired who may vote from Florida via absentee and our military men and women on assignment overseas.” – TOV (District 8-1) resident

There were a number of other reasons given to move away from budget voting during Annual Meetings. A few residents allude to the potential for hasty decisions being made on the budget during the meetings.

“This is a difficult one because while appreciate that the current process allows for direct citizen input into the budget process, I think it is too easy for last minute alterations with potentially large consequences to be implemented with little or no vetting.” – Village resident

While the majority would like to move away from voting on the budget during Annual Meetings, a few noted that those meetings still have their purpose for information sharing and debate, even if the ultimate vote takes place at a later date during all-day voting.

“Vote should be by Australian ballot. Annual meetings should be used for clarification (along with other info/clarification events on an as-needed basis).” – TOV (District 8-1) resident



Taxation

Another cornerstone issue related to the merger question is taxation. Respondents to the survey were given information about municipal tax rates, in which Village residents currently pay more in municipal taxes compared to the residents of the Town outside the Village. It was explained that a move toward a single municipality would result in tax rates meeting somewhere in the middle. Respondents were then asked whether they would support having a single tax rate.

Q. In a merged government, all residents should pay municipal taxes based on a single tax rate, regardless of where in Essex someone lives.

	TOTAL	Voting District		
		8-1	8-2	8-3
	N = 844	N = 289	N = 345	N = 155
Agree	66.11%	57.44%	87.83%	34.84%
Disagree	33.89%	42.56%	12.17%	65.16%

Two-thirds of the community would support a single tax rate. However, there are clear, predictable divisions within the community.

Village residents in 8-2 are overwhelmingly in favor, with 41% of them indicating it would result in their taxes going down. That wasn't the top reason they support a single tax rate, however.

Across all districts, residents that support a single tax rate (N = 561) say they feel it is fair because everyone is an Essex resident — 80.39% of those in favor of a single tax rate said this, making it the top-cited reason. The other top reason is the belief that a single tax rate would help ensure the quality of municipal services, and that access to those services would be maintained throughout all of Essex — 73.26% of those in favor of a single tax rate selected this answer choice. Half of those in favor said a single tax rate would make it feel like a more unified community.

A third of the community, however, does not support a single tax rate (N = 287), with the strongest opposition coming from 8-3. The top reason for not wanting a single tax rate, cited by 76.31% of those not in favor, is the belief that not everyone benefits equally from municipal services and shouldn't have to pay based on the same rate. One comment noted that some services are more convenient for Village residents. Additionally, half of those that don't support a single tax rate say so because they believe it would mean taxes increasing.

Nearly a quarter of those that are not in favor of a single tax rate voiced other concerns. A few respondents mentioned they shouldn't have their taxes increased based on budgets set previously by Village voters.



“I didn't vote to grow Brownell Library and EJRP to their current size. Why should I be forced to pay for them?” – TOV (District 8-3) resident

A few Town outside the Village residents also stated that they chose to live in the Town, and not the Village, because of lower tax rates.

“Major, major concern! Definitely not in favor. One reason I chose to live in the Town was the tax rate. People in the Village chose to live there. I am not willing to share the tax burden because the Village residents want relief.” – TOV (District 8-1) resident

Q. Merger that results in a single municipal tax rate may cause property taxes to increase for some residents. If a single tax rate for all residents in the community were to be achieved after a period of time of gradually evening-out tax rates, what would be the ideal time frame?

	TOTAL N = 844	Essex should have a single tax rate	
		Agree N = 558	Disagree N = 286
Immediately	16.23%	17.74%	13.29%
No more than 3 yrs.	18.60%	26.88%	2.45%
No more than 5 yrs.	25.12%	34.05%	7.69%
No more than 7 yrs.	5.21%	5.73%	4.20%
No more than 10 yrs.	12.09%	11.11%	13.99%
No more than 12 yrs.	22.75%	4.48%	58.99%

In the listening sessions, we touched on the topic of phasing in a tax increase, should a merger be put up for a vote. We asked the above question in the interest of gauging public sentiment on the ideal time frame, should a single tax rate come into effect.

While the survey was in the field, we received feedback that this question forced respondents who are not in favor of a single tax rate to make a choice without giving them an option to indicate they wouldn't support it, and we agree with that feedback. That could in part explain why the majority of those that would disagree with having a single tax rate would want to push it out as far as possible.



On the flip side, of those that would support a single tax rate, a majority indicated they would like to see a single tax rate achieved in either no more than 3 years or no more than 5 years, which is similar to what we heard in the listening sessions.

Impact on Municipal Services

Just 3 in 10 respondents (28.08%) indicate they would be concerned that merger would decrease services that contribute to their quality of life in Essex, such as the availability of recreational programs or the frequency in which streets are plowed in the winter. This finding holds throughout the different areas of the community.

However, those that believe merger would impact municipal services (N = 237), would be concerned about public works (60.76%), recreation (59.49%), libraries (56.12%), and planning/community development (52.32%). TOV residents were more likely to express concern over planning/community development, whereas Village residents were more likely to express concern over libraries, recreation, and the senior center.

Development and Planning

When it comes to development and planning, half of all respondents (53.91%) said there are aspects they both like and dislike as it pertains to development in Essex. District 8-3 residents were more likely to dislike the way the community is developing (32.09%), compared to 21.80% of District 8-1 residents and 19.71% of District 8-2 residents. Nearly 20% of District 8-1 residents and 18.55% of District 8-2 residents say they like the way the community is developing, compared to 10.32% of District 8-3 residents.

Merger and its impact on development, in particular negative impacts on development, were a key theme in the TOV resident-specific listening sessions. The survey finds that District 8-3 residents are more concerned about potential negative impacts related to development as a result of merger.

Q. How do you believe merger will impact development in the community?

	TOTAL	Voting District		
		8-1	8-2	8-3
	N = 844	N = 289	N = 345	N = 155
Positive impact	18.48%	15.57%	24.64%	11.61%
Negative impact	22.27%	24.57%	11.59%	40.00%
No impact	25.36%	25.95%	29.86%	16.77%
Don't know enough to say	33.89%	33.91%	33.91%	31.61%



On a similar note, the survey also asked respondents how important it is to retain the character of the rural parts of Essex. Nine in 10 residents say it is at least somewhat important, with over half (53.67%) saying it is very important, including 4 in 10 of Village residents and 76.13% of District 8-3 residents.

Identity

The topic of merger often stirs up debate over identity and whether to retain aspects of existing municipal identities or combining aspects of identities or starting new. Our initial survey and listening sessions certainly found residents sharing their thoughts on what to name a potential single municipality — or what name(s) would be a non-starter.

Though we did not specifically ask about names for a single municipality in this survey, we did ask about the importance of identity. What we found is Village residents are slightly more likely to want to hold on to some aspects of the existing Town and Village identities.

Q. If the two municipalities merge, we should try to retain some aspects of our Town and Village identities, as long as it doesn't impact costs of the delivery of municipal services.

	Area of Essex		
	TOTAL	TOV	Village
	N = 844	N = 443	N = 401
Strongly agree	22.87%	16.70%	29.68%
Somewhat agree	19.31%	16.48%	22.44%
Neither agree nor disagree	24.88%	26.41%	23.19%
Somewhat disagree	13.39%	14.67%	11.97%
Strongly disagree	19.55%	25.73%	12.72%

On a related note, a question did ask respondents whether the Village of Essex Junction should be known as the unincorporated Village of Essex Junction, with no separate governing body or taxing authority, in an effort to retain the Village's historic identity in a merged community. Sixty percent of Village residents supported this idea, while 40% of TOV residents supported this.



Public Outreach and Communication

Throughout all phases of research, we’ve heard residents tell us they want more details and more information related to a potential merger question provided to them by the two governing bodies.

Residents throughout the community would prefer information to be sent directly to them, whether that’s through mail or email, which includes Front Porch Forum updates. Direct communication is recommended so that the onus is not placed on residents themselves to seek out information, however, ever-present resources like the Town and Village websites and the GreaterEssex2020.org website would still be valuable places for residents to receive information.

How would you like to receive information pertaining to a proposed merger? Check all that apply.

- 58.53% – Mail sent to home
- 52.37% – Front Porch Forum
- 52.25% – Email
- 49.53% – Town/Village websites
- 39.69% – Merger-specific website
- 33.29% – Town/Village social media
- 32.94% – Annual Meetings
- 31.40% – Other public meetings

N = 844

We did not ask a question about frequency of communication, but the comment below echoes a sentiment we heard in some of the listening sessions and the first survey. Communicate early, often, and objectively.

“Saturate us. Don't give any chance for the people on the losing side to say they didn't have the opportunity to participate or understand what they were agreeing to. And start immediately. You barely have a year before you'd have to warn the vote and that's a lot of work to do, information to give and feedback to solicit and process.” – TOV (District 8-3) resident

Timing

Though we did not specifically gauge public sentiment on the timing of these efforts, we did hear feedback on the timing, as we did in the listening sessions. We’ve heard in previous research and in this survey that this feels like it is being rushed and pushed through without enough public input.

“I feel like we are rushing towards this and you want me to want this but you haven't given me concrete information about how you are going to do this. And to be honest, I don't really trust those in power. How do I know if I vote 'yes' because you will do XYZ that you won't turn around and say, sorry, we can't do that?” – Village resident



Also, throughout our research, we've received comments questioning whether it is appropriate to gauge public sentiment around merger with the perception that there hasn't been much information conveyed to the public to this point about details.

"I don't even see how this survey can be pushed out at this point which is asking merger questions without explaining the benefits and costs of the mergers. Would like to see a projection of future costs likely to be incurred in the next 10 or so years by both the present town and Village. For example, I understand a recent Village meeting was impacted because sewage was backed up. Is the Village about to incur expensive costs related to infrastructure in the next 10 years? Is the town liable for similar expenses? There needs to be open transparency on projected costs and any cost shifting that would be dealt to residents because of this should a merger occur." – TOV (District 8-3) resident

This comment references the timeline for a potential merger vote that would be planned to coincide with the 2020 presidential election. With an anticipated contentious national election on the horizon, it's fair to say that Essex residents may be saddled with a potentially contentious local issue to contend with as well. Should a merger question be considered during that election, communication leading up to a potential vote should convey why that election was chosen for a public vote.

"I believe it is not an auspicious time for this effort. The national politics are moving on the same timeline and are so toxic and polarizing I don't believe there will be enough room for people to participate in both with open hearts and open minds. Both conversations are so exhausting that I believe having them run in parallel is unrealistic. We all have demanding lives beyond politics" – TOV (District 8-1) resident

The "Timeline and Process" section of the infographic on the GreaterEssex2020.org website is a great resource for sharing the steps in the process, should this move forward, but perhaps more clarity and detail is required regarding any planned public outreach and communication, which is noted as occurring throughout the timeline.



Final Takeaways, Recommendations, and Action Items

Residents remain divided over whether to merge or not

Slightly less than half of all residents are currently in favor of merger while a third are opposed. That leaves a little less than 20% who are undecided and could swing support in either direction. The undecided segment is hungry for more communication, detail, and clarity around tax impacts, representation structure, and perceived benefits of merging.

Recommendation: As more decisions are made and a proposal is potentially developed, continue to check the pulse with residents with formal or informal feedback sessions or surveys to gauge whether the conversation is moving in a direction that will gain the support of the majority of the community.

There is no slam-dunk option for a potential merger, but there is receptiveness overall to options that include district/ward representation

In both the listening sessions and this latest survey, we are seeing residents from across the community gravitate toward the idea of having district/ward-based representation – 6 in 10 residents agree that if the municipalities merged that there should be representative districts. Perceived benefits include a feeling of fair or equal representation and a belief that local concerns would be better addressed, which are two key concerns of TOV residents as well as residents that are undecided or currently opposed to merger. Village residents may not be as receptive to a model that has district/ward-based seats only, but they would be open to a combination approach.

However, residents did express concern that a district/ward-based model may exacerbate division in the community between TOV residents and Village residents.

Recommendation: Should a district/ward-based model or a combo model that includes district/ward-based seats be pursued, consider whether it would be possible to draw districts that don't conform to existing Village and TOV borders. A few respondents suggested this in the listening sessions and on the survey as well. Also, should this be pursued, consider positioning district/ward representation as a way to ensure fairness and a diverse set of voices serving the greater good of the entire Essex community.

A gradual step up to a single tax rate would be required, should a merger go through.

Two-thirds of Essex residents would support a single tax rate if there were to be a single municipality and most residents would not be content with immediate tax rate equalization. The majority of Village residents would want tax rate equalization within three years while the majority of TOV residents would want tax equalization in 10-12 years.



Recommendation: Meeting somewhere in the middle would see tax equalization in 5-7 years. If a merger proposal is developed, solicit additional feedback to gauge whether Village residents would be OK with a longer timeline and if TOV residents would be OK with a shorter timeline if it meant the inclusion of a representation model they are more likely to be in favor of.

There are a few areas of consensus in the community, including opposition to having a mayor and support for moving away from conducting municipal budget votes at Annual Meetings

A majority of residents across the community would not support having a mayor, feeling like it would be an unnecessary layer of government where interested candidates for public office would be better served running for the governing board.

Regarding budget votes, residents would prefer an Australian ballot vote to ensure more residents can participate in the budget approval process. Some residents like the idea of keeping the tradition of Annual Meetings alive as a way to receive information related to the budget and discuss it with elected officials and community members before putting it up for vote.

Recommendation: Should a merger proposal be drafted, keep a mayor out of it and explore the opportunity to add charter language that establishes budget approval through Australian ballot voting.

Additional Recommended Action Items

- **Keep the resident feedback loop open and continue to encourage resident input to shape any potential merger proposal.** Don't give the impression that because this survey is completed that residents won't have opportunities to participate in this process.
 - Consider open workshops to test ideas in real time with community members between now and a potential proposal presentation at the Annual Meetings
 - Consider conducting more frequent, focused surveys (3-5 questions) to get quick feedback on burning questions while in the process of developing a potential proposal. There are many cost-effective tools you can use to poll residents, as well as some mobile app-based solutions.
- **Provide a more detailed timeline and process.** We kept hearing from some residents "I need to see more information before providing input." Let them know what details and education will be provided when, if possible. For example, let them know when they may see projected cost savings, potential tax impacts, or district maps should that model be pursued.
- **Develop a communications plan that features plenty of direct outreach to residents.** Residents told us that mail, Front Porch Forum newsletters, and email are their preferred channels for receiving information pertaining to the merger question. Keep



residents informed about major milestones, planned events, or links to additional surveys or feedback gathering activities. Link back to the merger website or municipal sites, but don't assume residents will seek out information on their own. And always remember – **communicate early, often, objectively, and out in the open.**