

An Examination of a Shared Service Delivery Model for the Village of Essex Junction-Town of Essex, Vermont

Summary Report of the Shared Services Assessment Study
Team

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Commissioned by:

Village of Essex Junction Trustees

Town of Essex Selectboard

Respectfully Submitted:

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However, a special thank you is warranted to the current and past leadership of the Village Trustees (including Village President George Tyler) and Town Selectboard (including current Selectboard Chair Max Levy and former Selectboard Chair Linda Myers).

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1.0. Introduction: How We Got Here

The delivery of high-quality services to taxpaying residents is a cornerstone of local government. There are roughly 89,000 local governments throughout the United States including municipalities,¹ school districts, and special districts. Collectively, the New England Public Policy Center estimates that expenditures by these local governments totaled \$1.5 trillion in 2007—equal to 11 percent of U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in that year.²

External forces to the Village of Essex Junction and the Town of Essex since 1998³a—including changes in education finance, the “Great Recession,” and the subsequent slow U.S. and Vermont economic recovery—have provided the incentive for Town and Village government to examine how they can continue to provide high quality services to Town and Village residents in the wake of increasing budget stress and service quality challenges. Around the country, budget pressures due to state financial aid reductions, stagnant and sometime falling property values, unfunded mandates, and other curbs in state and federal funding have forced localities to reduce services and staffing. Because the financial resources which could fund local governments are expected to remain constrained for the foreseeable future, policymakers and academics have begun to examine service delivery options that as recently as 10 years ago seemed implausible.

Among the options once thought of as unlikely is the possibility of re-organizing local government service delivery systems to share or consolidate the provision of local services across local political boundaries. While most of the recent discussions on this front have involved a regionalization approach to service delivery (such as the consolidation of services provided by multiple, individual local jurisdictions into a regional entity for a function such as public safety dispatch), this same set of factors has motivated the Essex Selectboard and the

¹ The term “municipalities” in this case refers to cities and towns.

² See “The Quest for Cost-Efficient Local Government in New England: What Role for Regional Consolidation?; New England Public Policy Center; Research report 13-1; February 2013; Page 3.

³ These appear to have begun with the late 1990s re-structuring of state funding for Grades K-12 education in Vermont in the aftermath of the Brigham Decision by the Vermont Supreme Court and continue with the current uncertainty regarding the future of IBM chip fabrication facility in the community and its potential acquisition by another multi-national firm.

Village Trustees to more fully explore, and to take some concrete steps towards, a mutual inter-local agreement to re-organize and rationalize services delivery within the Town of Essex and the Village of Essex Junction.

The process began back in the late Summer of 2012 when the Town Selectboard and Village Trustees held a joint exploratory meeting to discuss the broad concept of an inter-local services agreement. The discussion evolved into an assessment of the idea of a utilizing a “shared manager” and to examine what lessons could be learned on this subject from the applicable history within the State of Vermont. After additional exploratory meetings, the two boards decided a full investigation of the shared services concept was warranted. A former Village Trustee (Mary L. Morris) and a former member of the Town Selectboard (Jeffrey B. Carr) were asked to undertake a broad examination of the community’s services delivery infrastructure, and to serve as a Shared Services Assessment Team. After nearly two years of formal and informal information gathering, interviews with all department heads within the various Village and Town departments, a survey of Village and Town employees,⁴ interviews with the current Town Manager, an interview with a former Village manager, and follow-up synthesis and analysis, this report lays out the findings of this assessment of a shared or consolidated service delivery model for the two municipalities.

2.0. Summary of Findings

The results of our shared-services study included a number of key findings. While there were a large number of important ideas assembled that involved details well beyond the eight more generalized findings of the study, the results fell within the following broad categories:

- 1. POWERFUL FORCES THAT ARE LARGELY BEYOND THE COMMUNITY’S CONTROL ARE COMPELLING CHANGE IN THE DELIVERY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES: A review of the literature and published studies on this subject indicated that the community is being pushed in the direction of a shared service or consolidated service delivery model by powerful, largely external forces. These forces are challenging traditional models of services delivery, and were at least partly responsible for encouraging the two legislative Boards to request this services delivery assessment.**

The forces of change show no signs of abating. The community is, therefore, left with no other logical policy choice but to innovate and collaborate in order to preserve local services quality in this increasingly challenging environment.

⁴ The survey was conducted in November-December of 2012 and resulted in 40 responses from Village and Town employees.

- 2. THE INITIAL EXPERIENCE WITH THE UNIFIED MANAGER HAS BEEN A SUCCESS:** This assessment found that initial experience to-date with the “unified manager” has been an unqualified success. No significant impediment to an integrated manager model was uncovered during the study.

The two legislative Boards may wish to consider a more formal review by a third party regarding the initial experience with the unified manager model—such as the Vermont League of Cities and Towns—to independently verify the results of this assessment to protect the community against a “false positive” finding.

- 3. AN IMPRESSIVE AMOUNT OF COORDINATION-COLLABORATION ALREADY EXISTS BETWEEN VILLAGE AND TOWN DEPARTMENTS:** Our assessment found an already impressive amount of cooperation and collaboration among and between Village and Town departments. Virtually all department staff expressed a desire to increase the current level of cooperation and collaboration between their respective Village and Town counterparts—as long as they believed this effort had the full support of the Village and Town governing Boards and leadership.

All interviewees felt that there was still much more to be gained through greater cooperation and collaboration with their Town or Village counterpart. With more collaboration, they indicated they would “fall into opportunities” that have not yet been thought of in their service-delivery areas. Interviewees also felt that greater cooperation and collaboration would occur organically, if both Boards clearly said they wanted this cooperation-collaboration to occur as a matter of well-defined, articulated Village/Town policy.

- 4. MORE JOINT PLANNING IS NEEDED:** Interviewees identified a need for more joint Village and Town planning. They felt this was the key to strengthening the municipality.

Interviewees indicated that bringing together the planning and zoning committees will ensure the overarching vision of the municipalities is the same and this action will help preserve the identity that is the Essex community. Interviewees also indicated there were too many rules and regulations that prevent Town and Village planning committees from working more closely together. A relatively straight-forward path can resolve this condition—as long as it has support of the two legislative Boards.

- 5. WELL-DEVELOPED “SHARED-COLLABORATIVE SERVICES” PLANS IN KEY DEPARTMENTS ALREADY EXIST:** We were surprised to learn that several key departments already had well-developed, though still evolving, plans to consolidate their service-delivery functions with their Village/Town counterparts.

These preliminary plans in our view represent “low-hanging fruit” for next steps in the current shared service effort in the Village/Town.

This study does not make a recommendation in terms of the prioritization or ordering of next steps for each department or service area (see Section 8.1 through Section 8.8 below where each key department area is discussed). If the general policy were to be endorsed by the two legislative Boards and Village/Town administration, there would be a natural impetus for forward progress across most departmental fronts, which would be primarily governed by the idiosyncrasies of each service area and its leadership-policy making bodies.

- 6. THIS EFFORT SHOULD “KEEP IT SIMPLE:”** As the community’s service delivery organizations move toward changing/modifying or eliminating obstacles to shared/consolidated services, care must be exercised to make sure these steps do not make things more complicated or less transparent. We need to make sure to “keep it simple.”

There is already much confusion within the community as to which department or entity does what, when, and how much it costs. The solution should not be more complicated or confusing than the service delivery subject that is being addressed.

- 7. THE END RESULT WILL BE DRIVEN BY OUR OWN COMMUNITY’S NEEDS:** Our review of the shared-service experience of others revealed there is no standard formula for dealing with the strong external forces compelling our community to change. In fact, what is to be done will be driven by our own community’s internal needs.

The “lessons learned” from examining the experience of others is that the path forward for success or failure of the Town of Essex and Village of Essex Junction effort would be driven by our ourselves. The process will be guided by our strengths and weaknesses, the idiosyncrasies of our own community, and the willingness of our leaders and services stakeholders to set the supportive environment for this improvement to occur for the long-term well-being of our community.

- 8. GOVERNANCE IS A KEY CONCERN TO BE DEALT WITH IN THE FUTURE:** Given the strong forces moving the community into the shared-service direction, the Two Legislative Boards should consider undertaking and completing a comprehensive examination of “governance” within the community. This should be undertaken cooperatively by the Village Trustees and the Town Selectboard.

While this was not an examination of “governance,” the issue came up over and over again in our discussions. However, the two Legislative Boards need to lead this examination and champion any needed changes consistent with “Smart Governance.” This examination should incorporate the values of the community into our government, and identify structural impediments to changes that need to be addressed to further the efficient and effective delivery of high-quality services demanded by our citizens.

The authors intend this to be a “living study,” subject to continuous review and update, as more information is gathered and greater experience is gained with the shared service delivery model. In our current environment, change is inevitable and we believe should be embraced. The ability of our various departments—arising from a strong expression of policy from the two Legislative Boards—to institutionalize an active process of continuous improvement for: (1) planning, and (2) delivering high quality municipal services is a key to increasing “well-being” over the long-term within the Essex community.

3.0. Overview of the Assessment Study’s Objectives

There were three main outcome goals for the inter-local, shared service assessment study. These included the following:

1. Review the current status of services delivery in the Town and Village and identify opportunities for synergies and to reduce overlap/duplication by sharing/consolidating services,
2. Establish the groundwork for further discussions so that the examination of services delivery within the community is continuous and on-going, and
3. Develop a list of recommendations to advancing an effort for shared service delivery in the town for both the near-term and long-term time horizons.

Process objectives for the study included:

1. On an interim basis, identify a list of considerations for a “Unified Manager” approach for Village and Town service delivery using the applicable experience in Waterbury, the Chittenden County Supervisory Union, and elsewhere,
2. Conduct a department-by-department review of service delivery for each Village and Town department within the broader context of #1 above by actively engaging members of each legislative body, department heads and employees, and citizens in each chartered municipality,
3. Assure that broader, community-wide planning efforts and consensus building are incorporated into this study, and

4. Publish a set of study-inspired recommendations for the re-organization of the community services delivery network that take advantage of synergies indicated by the study, while reducing duplication wherever possible in current service-delivery mechanisms.

In early 2013, the interim objective of assessing the pros and cons of a “Unified Manager” was completed and a “Unified Manager” was hired. Following the appointment of a single municipal manager to assist the Village Trustees and the Town Selectboard (which happened to be the incumbent Town Manager), the Shared Services Assessment Team was asked to monitor and evaluate developments during the initial phase of the Village’s and Town’s service delivery experience under the Unified Manager. This additional objective for the study underpins much of the reason why the findings of the study were released in 2014 instead of a year earlier.

4.0. Overview of Recent Local-Municipal Government Experience with Shared Service Delivery

The commitment to “local control” runs deep in Vermont and across the six-state New England region. The Boston Federal Reserve Bank in a recent study on cost-efficient local government noted that although the six New England states comprise only about 2% of the land area of the United States, the 6 New England states together comprise about 4% of the nation’s local governments. This emphasis on local control and the tradition of “home rule”⁵ have resulted in the primary responsibility for providing local services to municipal governments in Vermont, across the entire New England region, and also in states like New York.⁶

Therefore, experience with true inter-local services delivery among municipalities in our region is very unusual. Most of what limited experience there is involves centralizing the responsibility for certain types of municipal services at an existing regional authority (such as a county government or a Council of Governments) or involves centralization at the state level. In fact, the available evidence indicates that full-scale mergers of local governments have remained “extremely rare.”⁷ Much of the reason for this is that empirical evidence on the merits of service

⁵ Home rule places the primary responsibility for providing local services on cities, towns and villages. The original objective of “home rule” during the progressive era of the twentieth century was to facilitate local control and minimize state intervention in municipal affairs. In New England, Home Rule states include Massachusetts and Maine. Limited Home Rule exists in Rhode Island. Vermont and New Hampshire are so-called Dillon’s Rule states where municipalities have only limited authority to pass a law or ordinance that is not specifically permitted in the state’s constitution. For these “not permitted” laws or ordinances, the municipality must obtain permission from the state legislature. See “Dillon’s Rule or Not?,” Research Brief; National Association of Counties; Volume 2, Number 1; January 2004.

⁶ This in part explains the very limited role of counties in the provision of public services in all states across New England.

⁷ See “The Quest for Cost-Efficient Local Government in New England: What Role for Regional Consolidation?” New England Public Policy Center; Research Report 13-1; February 2013; Page 4; and see Warner, Mildred E. and

consolidation has generally been inconclusive. There has been little solid, decision-making quality information to-date regarding the impact that service delivery consolidation will have on either service quality or cost-savings for those who attempt it.⁸

Although the empirical evidence regarding a shared-services approach is somewhat lacking, various studies and articles have accurately laid out the opposing perspectives. Proponents of shared services or consolidation point out that the maximum decentralization of services may lead to higher service delivery costs—requiring duplicative oversight and less efficient utilization of the municipality’s services delivery assets (including both hard assets and personnel resources).⁹ Proponents of shared/consolidated services also correctly note that assigning responsibility for providing local services to each municipality can cause inequities in funding burdens on taxpayers (e.g. when state financial support for any service is insufficient)—causing sub-populations within the municipality to either carry unequal funding burdens which may cause the population to “self-select” into jurisdictions based on ability to pay. Proponents also point to possible negative externalities associated with maximum decentralization of services delivery, where the decisions-actions of one jurisdiction may have adverse consequences (such as traffic congestion) on their neighbors. Having a more centralized structure, this reasoning goes, allows the governing body or bodies to more appropriately internalize such externalities.

Opponents to shared/consolidated services correctly point out that decentralized systems allow localities to devise services delivery mechanisms and the taxation systems to support them that are most in line with the desires of a locality’s residents and taxpayers. In addition, the smaller scale of decentralized systems facilitates the ability of municipal residents to more closely track and monitor what their local government is doing—potentially increasing the quality and efficiency of services versus the larger scale of a shared or centralized delivery system. In addition, opponents point out that many municipal services can be provided as cost effectively by smaller units of government as by larger units of government. The resulting service delivery diversity that the decentralized model affords allows residents and businesses to make more informed choices about their own individual preferences regarding municipal services and taxing structures. This alignment between individual household and business preferences regarding the role of their local government would, in turn, tend to increase societal welfare-happiness.

Amir Hefetz; 2009; Cooperative Competition: Alternative Service Delivery, 2002-2007; Municipal Yearbook 2009; Washington, DC; International City/County Management Association.

⁸ See Carr, Jared B. and Richard C. Feiock; 2004; City-County Consolidation and Its Alternatives: Reshaping the Local Government Landscape; M.E. Sharpe; Armonk, New York and London, England.

⁹ To the extent services exhibit economies of scale potential, smaller jurisdictions will have higher costs per resident/user.

4.1 What Was Learned from Others' Experience in Vermont

Despite strong arguments on both sides of the issue, there are few examples that are truly applicable to the current status of the service delivery network in the community. That is, upon examination of the circumstances and experience with shared/consolidated services in the Town and Village of Waterbury, Vermont (which recently moved towards service sharing/consolidation) and in the Town of Northfield, Vermont (where a shared services agreement was recently terminated) in the end appeared to be less applicable to Essex Village and Town efforts than was originally expected.

For example, the motivation driving Waterbury Town and Waterbury Village to share/consolidate was financially driven by one of the involved municipalities and did not involve a discussion between two equally-positioned municipalities looking for service delivery synergies. With respect to the Northfield separation experience, the end of a shared services arrangement was not based on a perceived failure of a shared/consolidated services arrangement per se. Rather, the agreement appeared to end primarily due to inter-personal conflicts among political leaders and others in the community. As such, neither of these experiences was thought by the Shared Services Assessment Team to be directly applicable to the Village and Town experience. **The lessons learned from the examination of those Vermont experiences and what we have found in the literature was that the blueprint for success or failure of the Town of Essex and Village of Essex Junction effort would be driven by ourselves. We would primarily be guided by our strengths and weaknesses, the idiosyncrasies of our own community, and the willingness of our leaders and stakeholders for various types of services to seek to improve the overall well-being of our community.**

4.2 What Has Been Learned from Experience To-Date with the Unified Manager

All interviewees indicated that the experience to-date with the Unified Manager was an unqualified success. Although this manager's sharing arrangement has caused some on the Town staff to have reduced access to the Town Manager, we identified no significant impediment or negative fall-out from the first roughly two years of actual experience with the decision. Certainly, at least some of the "success" is attributable to the incumbent and the leadership of the two involved Boards. However, it seems clear that as important as the persons and leaders involved with this new approach to municipal administration in the Village and Town are for laying the groundwork for change, it is the incumbent and the leaders on both Boards that will continue to be the critically important catalysts for future steps.

Although we found no significant criticism of the Unified Manager arrangement, we recognize that there is a small possibility that interviewees were telling us what they thought we wanted to hear. Most interviewees understand the concept on a Unified Manager had the support of the Town Manager and they all appeared to understand that our investigation had the support of the Town Manager. As such, we believe it is prudent that the two legislative Boards undertake an

independent assessment of the Unified Manager experience in order to assure there was no bias in the information provided during this study. An independent organization such as the Vermont League of City and Towns is a logical candidate to undertake such a review—given their deep institutional understanding of local governance issues of significance regarding this issue.

5.0. This Study Took a Different Approach than is “Typical” for Shared/Consolidated-Services

While most studies and efforts regarding the efficacy of a shared/consolidated services approach tend to focus on the economic aspects of the issue,¹⁰ this study had the singular focus of developing recommendations for improving the quality of and rationalizing the service delivery system of the community in total. If there were budget savings (e.g. from reducing the administrative effort for each service) or new sources of revenue (e.g. grants) that emerge from the implementation of the recommendations, those economic or financial gains were treated as secondary impacts. This overriding service quality process objective was decided early on during the initial discussions with the Village Trustees and the Town Selectboard as the study was being designed.

Non-economic reasons abound for the two service delivery staffs to collaborate. These were succinctly presented in a recent publication from the IBM Center for the Business of Government entitled: “A County Manager’s Guide to Shared Services in Local Government,” published in the Spring of 2013.¹¹ Although this publication was, like many others, focused on regional consolidation of municipal service systems, there were several underlying themes that are also applicable to inter-local services sharing that also make good sense for the current Village and Town service delivery assessment effort:

1. Stimulates Innovation/Continuous Improvement

Conversations between professionals on both staffs will (and already have) lead to opportunities for innovation. Such conversations get very detailed about how services currently are and should be provided. This tends to wear down concerns about the current system and shifts focus to how these services could and should be provided—leading to innovations and on-going analysis-assessments that leads to continuous system improvement.

2. Builds on Complimentary Strengths by Sharing Knowledge and Skills

The process of providing shared or consolidated services often leads to the sharing of staff expertise or specialized equipment that one community may have and the other lacks. Working together, this sharing of expertise and skills can result in the helpful exchange of ideas and improve the level and quality of services in the community.

¹⁰ Either through cost or budget savings and/or as a source of new revenue.

¹¹ This was provided to the Shared Services Assessment Team by Essex Selectboard member Brad Luck.

3. Improves Working Relationships

A shared/consolidated services approach allows for free, regular, and open dialogue among service delivery staff and volunteers at all levels across municipal boundaries (e.g. not just among the legislative bodies). This regular communication can lead to better coordination and encourage new ideas that will be mutually beneficial to both the Town and Village service networks.

4. Improves Service Quality

Working together can create results that exceed the sum of the individual services delivery system parts working separately. The working partnerships forged by this approach, even if it does not ultimately save money, promotes stronger partnerships that result in the provision of better services to residents and taxpayers.

5.1 What Do We Know About the Precursors to Successful Shared-Service Arrangements?

As mentioned above, the literature is thin with respect to empirical research on the implementation of shared service arrangements in government. However, one such study of note was conducted by the Anisfield School of Business of Rampano College of New Jersey in 2008. In that study, the authors found that the success of shared service programs is dependent upon several factors—including the strength of the leadership, effective communication, and the utilization of a phased approach. Among several findings that the authors identified through a survey of individuals and organizations involved in such efforts, they noted that the most positive result (Finding #4 of the study) regarding the implementation of a shared service approach was improved service (see below).

Finding 4: The most positive result of implementing shared services was “improved service.”¹²

Positive Result	Number	Percentage
Improved Service	10	19%
Increased collaboration	7	13%
Standardized Services	6	11%
Increased Efficiency	4	7%
Increased Focus	4	7%
Cost Savings	4	7%
Consolidation of Services	3	6%
Increased Awareness	3	6%
Increased Constituent Support	3	6%
Other	10	19%
Total Response	54	

¹² Yeaton, Kathryn G.; Success Factors for Implementing Shared Services in Government; The Anisfield School of Business, Rampano College of New Jersey; 2008; Pages 17-18.

By far, the most negative finding from the survey was inadequate “change management” and “political “turf wars” (see below).

Finding 5: The most negative result of implementing shared services was “people issues”.¹³

Negative Result	Number	Percentage.
People issues	23	43%
None	9	17%
Mistakes in Implementation	7	13%
Increased Confusion	5	10%
Other	10	19%
Total Responses	54	

To the Shared Services Assessment Team, the results of the interviews with the department heads, the employee survey, and discussions with the Unified Manager and the two Boards indicated to us that the necessary precursors for a successful experience with a shared/consolidated services model for the Village and Town were firmly in place. The Unified Manager and the Department Heads all wish to move forward in a way that will minimize the downsides and give the greater community the opportunity to realize all of the upsides associated of such an approach. Indeed, not only are the precursors in place, but the departments of each municipal entity appear to have developed significant forward momentum in that direction on their own. The chances for success in this area seem higher than they have ever been before—at least in recent memory. Success in this area seems to be within the grasp of the community if the leaders and department heads can avoid the typical pitfalls and remain focused on moving forward for the greater good for the entire community.

5.2 What This Shared-Consolidated Services Study Is “Not”

In the past, discussions in the Town of Essex and Village of Essex Junction regarding the re-organization of service delivery have inevitably raised concerns about municipal merger. While it is clear that the sharing of services can and in all likelihood will again raise such concerns, it is premature to engage in that discussion within the community based on this effort. Instead, this study is singularly focused on what makes sense for the effective delivery of local services to the residents and businesses within the Town of Essex and the Village of Essex Junction. Further, the findings of this study are made in the spirit of full transparency.

The members of the Shared Services Assessment Team encourage the residents and businesses in the community to review and ask questions about this study’s findings, which should be taken as they are presented. There are no hidden agendas or stealth efforts underway—in either direction way regarding municipal merger or municipal separation. That merger/separation issue is a broader discussion that can occur outside of this effort. This effort specifically looks only at matters to help organize the delivery of public services in a way that maximizes the benefit to the community and follows the broad guidelines of “smart governance.”

¹³ Ibid; Page 18.

6.0. Overview of the Current Service Delivery Network in the Community

Any study examining the possible sharing/consolidation of the Town and Village service provider network must begin with a description of the service-delivery network as it now stands in June of 2014. Currently, there are a total of 29 municipal services categories that exist in the community between the Town and the Village. Of that total, there are 20 services categories where there is no Village-Town service-delivery overlap. These services range from Police Services to voter registration and vital records. In addition, the community recently moved from separate Village and Town Managers to the “Unified Manager” concept. Another recent duplication-reduction step took place in 2009, when the Town assumed responsibility for providing Senior Bus service to the entire Town—including the Village. In terms of Town/Village resources expended, the most significant shared service in the community by far is the Police Department, with a 2015 budgetary expenditure level of more than \$3.9 million. The smallest shared service provided by the Town is the Health Officer’s budget, with 2015 budgetary expenditures of roughly \$10,450.

Table 1 (below) lays out the inventory of services provided within the community organized into two categories: (A) Services Provided by the Town Service Delivery System for the Entire Community, and (B) Services that are Candidates for Shared Service Delivery Systems. Although the first category of services categories could be termed “duplicative,” it is clear that many of these departments primarily serve either the Village geography or Town outside of the Village area—much like districts for those services. This is particularly true for Planning and Zoning, Public Works, and Parks and Recreation—even though the latter two services clearly do benefit both Village residents and Town-outside-the-Village residents. The listed costs associated with each function reflect total Town and Village expenditures and Town and Village expenditures funded by taxes, in order to allow the reader to understand the difference between total costs and taxpayer funded costs of each service. The difference between the two cost numbers reflects non-tax revenue sources in some services areas such as user fees for Parks and Recreation, state funding (for Public Works), grant funding (for CCTA), equitable sharing funds (for the Police Department) and similar non-tax sources.

Services that already fall into the shared category (Category A) comprise \$6.2 million of total budget expenditures and \$5.0 million of all tax-supported spending (considering Town spending only) and include 20 of 29 service areas in the community. Overall, already-shared-services categories comprise 49.4% of the total expenditure budget and 51.3% of the tax-supported spending by the Town taxpayers (which include both Village residents and Town outside the Village residents). A total of 4 of the 20 shared service categories have no direct budgetary costs associated with them—although there clearly are costs associated with these functions that are assigned to other categories (e.g. Liquor Control Board which is split between Police, Town Manager’s Office and the Selectboard).

The candidates for service sharing (Category B) together total 40.6% of the total Town and Village budgetary spending and 48.7% of tax-supported Town and Village budgeted spending in 2015 and include a total of 9 additional categories of services. Of the service categories that are candidates for shared services, the Public Works-Highways and Streets/Stormwater category¹⁴ has the largest total expenditures budget and tax-supported expenditures level. The Board of Civil Authority and Board of Abatement have the smallest budgetary impacts. A total of 3 of these 9 services categories have no direct costs assigned to them. These items fall within other cost categories as they do have costs, but are not currently broken out separately.

This suggests there are a number of candidate areas for services sharing, which will be discussed below.

¹⁴ We include Stormwater, Highways and Streets, and Public Works sub-categories of spending in this service area for analytical purposes.

Table 1: Status of Services Delivery (as of May 2014)

Service Description	Provided	Provided	Provided	2015 Budgeted Expenditures (\$)	2015 Budgeted Taxes (\$)
	by the Village	by the Town	by the Town for the Village		
A. Services Provided by the Town to All Residents					
1 Liquor Control Board		X	X	\$ -	\$ -
2 Board of Health		X	X	\$ -	\$ -
3 Licenses (Marriage, Dog, Hunting, etc.)		X	X	\$ 225,750	\$ -
4 Property Records		X	X	\$ 225,750	\$ -
5 Vital records (Marriage, Deaths)		X	X	\$ 225,750	\$ -
6 Voter Registration		X	X	\$ 225,750	\$ -
7 Real Estate Appraisal		X	X	\$ 222,600	\$ 215,500
8 Tax Mapping		X	X	\$ -	\$ -
9 Emergency Planning and HazMat		X	X	\$ 48,150	\$ 46,600
10 Geographic Information Systems (GIS)		X	X	\$ 48,150	\$ 46,600
11 911 Technical Assistance-Coordination		X	X	\$ 48,150	\$ 46,600
12 Senior Bus		X	X	\$ 66,300	\$ 64,200
13 Police Department		X	X	\$ 3,888,800	\$ 3,692,700
14 Health Officers		X	X	\$ 10,450	\$ 9,500
15 Town Service officer		X	X	\$ -	\$ -
16 Animal Control		X	X	\$ 30,150	\$ 27,450
17 Chittenden County Transportation Authority		X	X	\$ 243,250	\$ 235,550
18 County Taxes		X	X	\$ 108,750	\$ 105,300
19 Sanitation		X	X	\$ 12,500	\$ 12,100
20 Unified Manager		X	X	\$ 526,450	\$ 455,600
Sub-Total--Category A.		19	19	\$ 6,156,700	\$ 4,957,700
B. Services That Are Candidates for Shared Services [The Dollar Amounts Below include Both Town and Village Costs]					
1 Board of Civil Authority	X	X		\$ -	\$ -
2 Board of Abatement	X	X		\$ -	\$ -
3 Elections Management	X	X		\$ 21,600	\$ 21,000
4 Planning and Zoning	X	X		\$ 677,278	\$ 606,928
5 Fire	X	X		\$ 696,725	\$ 684,075
6 Library	X	X		\$ 1,121,507	\$ 1,093,807
7 Public Works-Highways and Streets/Stormwater	X	X		\$ 3,142,453	\$ 1,775,153
8 Parks and Recreation	X	X		\$ 646,950	\$ 528,700
9 Cemeteries	X	X		\$ -	\$ -
Sub-Total--Category B.				\$ 6,306,513	\$ 4,709,663
Grand Total				\$ 12,463,213	\$ 9,667,363
<i>Sub-Total Category A [% of Total]</i>				<i>49.4%</i>	<i>51.3%</i>
<i>Sub-Total Category B [% of Total]</i>				<i>50.6%</i>	<i>48.7%</i>

7.0. Overview of the Process for the Study

This study was led by the premise that if the political barriers to decision making are removed, by consolidating like-services as an example, we would encourage smart governance, which would enable flexible and efficient decision making and business practice modification. This, in turn, would have significant impact on the structure of the overall service model provided by the Town and the Village. Over the long-run, this reasoning goes, a shared/consolidated service model was the only practical way that the community could preserve the “high quality” of

services currently provided to the community’s residents. The study was also guided by the premise of beginning the process with a unified manager approach. This approach would allow the currently separate service delivery entities to incorporate the broader communitywide planning efforts into the assessment of NEEDED service in and across each municipality. Developing shared, forward-thinking planning will allow economic improvements; foster shared community values; and a commonality of goals and objectives that would collectively result in a higher quality of services provided to households and businesses alike across the community.

7.1 Summary of Interviews with Department Heads

In order to get the best information, the team conducted more than 20 interviews with a variety of Village and Town stakeholders. The Shared Services Assessment Team tapped the wealth of information residing within the experience sets of the department heads of both municipalities; the President of the Board of Trustees; Chair of Town Selectboard; the outgoing Village Manager;¹⁵ and the current Town/Village manager. These interviews were held over the course of 15 months. Each interview included a variety of questions which led to creative thinking and probing of each interviewee. Overall, it was apparent the Department heads are very dedicated to their work, their teams, and to the provision of the highest quality services to the public that they can, within budget and other constraints.

Some meetings were held with both the Town and Village holder of the role simultaneously (e.g. the interview with the town planner and village planner). Some interviews were held separately—particularly if the Shared Services Assessment Team felt the interview process would interfere with the free and uninhibited flow of information and ideas. While not an expected result, we found an impressive amount of existing collaboration between many town and village department heads. Departments were already sharing ideas and were cooperating on at least some issues and planning efforts. It also was also evident there were operational differences in many departments. However, it was universal that if encouraged to plan cooperatively, those departments would willingly work toward achieving shared, and in most cases, complimentary goals.

7.2 The Questionnaire

Each department head, and others, were asked a series of 12 questions (although for some questions there were sub-questions which increased the actual total number of inquiries) designed to identify what’s working, what’s not working and what the future would look like. These questions enabled the interviewee to discuss what was possible and practical to bring about efficient change and/or what makes sense to change. Each interviewee was specifically asked about obstacles to service sharing/consolidation. The participants all talked freely about how they thought their departments were working; how the “counterpart” in either the Village or the Town was working, and how they “were” or “were not” collaborating. They freely talked

¹⁵ As of the time of the interview.

about and identified areas for improvement—whether the service delivery within the community was shared, consolidated, or not.

7.2.1 The Questions

Although the interviews were wide ranging, the shared service assessment process used a prescribed set of what we called “exploratory questions” to structure each interview. This approach was employed primarily for consistency reasons in terms of gathering the information and data—but at the same time giving each interviewee the opportunity to elaborate on the critical service delivery issues within their department or area of responsibility. Although interviewees may have voluntarily offered information and perspective for a question before it was asked (and it was therefore not formally asked of the interviewee during the interview), the same areas of concern were covered in each session or interview conducted during the study.

The questions employed in the study included the following:

1. Do you have a to-do list?
 - a. What about a “stop-doing” list?
2. In terms of your current role, what gets you jazzed up? What are you passionate about?
3. What are you, or the municipality, the best at?
4. What are you, or the municipality, not the best at?
5. Describe the core values of the municipality.
6. What is the purpose of the [municipality or board]— in your own words.
7. What is the vision for the next 3-5-10 years?
8. Where do you see the shared service model?
 - a. Successful?
 - b. Not working? e.g. What are the potential road blocks or pitfalls?
9. Identify current challenges in your area (department manager)?
10. Identify recent success(es) in your area (department manager)?
11. If you were to “grade” the past year’s performance of the municipality/government, on an A-F scale, what would that grade be?
 - a. How do you believe the residents would grade?
 - b. How do we reconcile the differences?

- c. How do we get to a consistent “A”?

7.3 Full Survey of Village and Town Staff

The team also conducted a survey of all Village and Town staff (See Attachment 1). This survey focused on the individual as a member of the whole: decision making, awareness of department and municipality goals, team work and resource availability. The survey was provided to all staff members with a 30% return rate. This survey, anonymous by department and staff member, showed there is disparity between departments when asked about clear goals and long term objectives for the specific department. One very positive outcome is most of the staff members in each municipality have a high level of confidence in their leadership/management and believe their leadership has a long-term vision of the department and the services it provides the community.

Survey respondents indicated they were proud of what they do and feel very much a part of the team. Respondents also noted there is a demonstrated room for improvement when it comes to encouraging employees/staff members to be innovative in their work and reward/recognize the staff for their efforts. Finally, respondents pointed out that they could also improve overall service levels by increased communication within and between departments.

7.4 Overview of Discussions with “Heart & Soul of Essex”

Before we conducted the in-depth interviews with key department heads and staff, we met with the project coordinators¹⁶ of the Heart & Soul effort. This meeting was held in order to make sure the perspective of the Heart & Soul effort was included in the study and to communicate any common findings from the Shared/Consolidated Services Study.

The goals of the Heart & Soul’s grant funded initiative are to identify values of the community and to engage the community in a wide ranging discussion about its future. The opportunities were to establish regular conversations of shared interest. The feeling was that the community was in a time of growth and change and the Village and the Town had the ability to strengthen what matters in the community. The focus was not on solving problems, but on identifying shared values. The Heart & Soul of Essex effort accomplished the objective of conducting a civil and in-depth conversation about the direction of the community by many different groups of stakeholders. This effort laid important groundwork for the Village and the Town to proceed towards a shared-services approach.

The Heart & Soul Essex initiative identified six (6) core values that members of the community not only shared, but were also seen as critical to ensuring positive growth and effective change in the community. These included:

Core Values:

¹⁶ Susan McCormack and Liz Subin.

- Local Economy
- Health and Recreation
- Community Connections
- Education
- Thoughtful Growth
- Safety

Of these values, “Thoughtful Growth” and “Local Economy” have the most connection to the service delivery study. These two values were identified as the most concerning to the community because they were identified as needing attention “now.” The Town and Village appear to agree on priorities: balance of open space along with buildings; economic development providing support and growth for business; public and alternative transportation. The village and town planning committees are being urged to incorporate the six values into their new plans based on results of the Heart & Soul effort. This was an obvious link to the work of the shared/consolidated services study. Community connections also can be viewed as a link between the Heart & Soul initiative and this study. This value reflects a need to support/develop shared service or better collaboration between Village and Town governments and departments.

8.0. Summary Overview of Department Interviews/Recommendations

The following section summarizes the substance of our many interviews. These summaries also include any identified findings/recommendations by each major service delivery area within the Village and Town.

8.1 Unified Town Manager

As mentioned above, we found the Village and Town experience with the Unified Town Manager has been a success. All interviewees were decidedly positive in terms of their initial experience with this approach. While we did hear some feedback from Town staff that their contact with the Town Manager had had to become more limited and structured as the Town Manager split his time between Village responsibilities and his responsibilities with the Town, no interviewee indicated that this was a significant negative.¹⁷ While this may no doubt be a reflection of the skills and management expertise of the incumbent Unified Manager and his so far overall positive interaction with the Village and Town Legislative Boards, this is a very important enabling factor to proceeding further toward the shared/consolidated services model.

¹⁷ In many ways, losing unfettered and easy access to the Town Manager by Town staff may have had the benefit of compelling some to be more deliberate in terms of their requests and needs on the Town Manager’s time—perhaps even helping to improve decision-making for impacted department heads and staff.

In fact, the importance of maintaining this manager-to-board dynamic and the so far positive manager-to-staff interactions in both the Village and the Town cannot be over-stated. Just as they have had to-date, both the incumbent Manager and the two Legislative Boards must continue to carry this level of leadership forward if the shared service approach is to continue to advance.

As such, because this leadership dynamic is so critically important to the success future steps toward the shared service model, we recommend that the two Boards consider having an independent group—such as the Vermont League of Cities and Towns—conduct a review of the community’s experience with the Unified Manager model though its first 18 months of experience. Although we tried to obtain only honest and objective opinion in our interviews about the experience with the unified manager model from department heads and staff, we recognize that there could be some bias in the comments of interviewees that may have resulted in less than fully objective and unbiased feedback on the Unified Manager experience. This may have occurred because interviewees thought that was what we, as the Shared Services Assessment Team, may have wanted to hear only positive feedback. This independent review should be considered in our view as an important validation step against what could be a false positive—with respect to the community’s actual experience to-date with the Unified Manager.

Assuming affirmation of a positive outcome with respect to the Unified Manager experience, we recommend that a process be put in place to devise a series of next steps. The process should be inclusive of department heads and key staff, and result in consensus between the two legislative Boards¹⁸ and the Village-Town Manager. If warranted by the outcome of the previous steps, a short-term and long-term implementation plan should be devised and implemented after review with department heads and key staff.

8.1.1 Suggested Action Steps:

1. Consider commissioning an independent review of the Unified Manager experience to-date in the community to protect against a “false positive” determination with respect to to-date experience.
2. If step 1 has a positive outcome, consider holding a joint Board workshop with the Unified Manager and department heads to brain-storm next steps for the shared-services model implementation.
3. Identify all statutory and charter issues with Village and Town counsel.¹⁹

¹⁸ With the legislative Boards—who are elected officials—representing the taxpayers as they often do on many issues with respect to running the two service delivery systems.

¹⁹ During the initial joint meeting of the Village Trustees and Town Selectboard to discuss the findings of this study on August 26, 2014, a question arose about the impact service consolidation might have on the various employment

3. If steps 2 and 3 are undertaken, synthesize results and develop an action plan for the near-term and longer-term. Reach consensus among the legislative Boards and the Manager. Include strategies for addressing all legal and charter change issues identified above.
5. Review with affected Department Heads/Senior Staff.
6. Devise implementation plan—if warranted—including any required community votes.
7. Develop and implement a public engagement plan for the above.
8. Consider a comprehensive review of governance issues for the community that is consistent with the current advances in inter-municipal cooperation.

8.2 Finance and Administration

The meeting with Village staff occurred at the time they were sharing the vacant Village Manager position functions while continuing their “regular” functions: HR/Taxes/Clerk, IT,²⁰ Finance. Interviewees gave the performance of the Village an “A” for the value community members receive. Highlighted area for improvement overall was: helping the Village Trustees to keep from “getting to into the weeds” of day-to-day operations (e.g. managing process rather than allowing the specialists to get it done). They spoke of a need to better educate the citizens to understand how government was supposed to work. They also identified an incredible sense of support between and for each department. Consolidating, or at least sharing, resources among Recreation Departments, Public Works, Highways, and Stormwater between the Village and Town staffs were identified as opportunities for efficiencies.

Meeting with Town staff pointed to opportunities to reduce the number of bills citizens have to pay in the community—which would help reduce the current level of confusion. For example, the two finance departments are currently jointly pursuing a “one tax bill approach” that will combine Village and Town taxes and enterprise fund charges to be paid as one bill the same time, at either place—the Village offices or the Town offices. Overall, the Town Finance Director expressed a keen interest in harmonizing billing and accounting systems and in providing a balance between the services provided against the cost or efficiencies of those services. The Town Finance Director also suggested that a collaboration on administrative issues and planning in enterprise funds like water and sewer. It was suggested that consideration be given to a more coordinated planning/zoning effort, and to technology—a critical enabling factor to the single billing and record-keeping. It was noted that plans have been developed to share IT

contracts in the Town and Village with employee collective bargaining agreements. After follow-up with the Village-Town Manager, it was found that each agreement contains language that would result in “no impact” on the Village or Town collective bargaining agreements. Each agreement contains language that preserves the negotiated items in the event of a consolidated service delivery structure for village and town departments.

²⁰ The acronym “IT” refers to “Information Technology.”

infrastructure between the Town and the Village. This will allow for one platform and pave the way for ease of administration between the Town and Village departments.

8.2.1 Suggested Action Steps:

1. Follow through on staff suggestions to harmonize/consolidate billing and record keeping functions—which involves IT coordination to streamline.
2. Investigate the efficacy of consolidating enterprise funds and billing-recordkeeping functions for key utilities. Identify obstacles (e.g. differences in billing policies—such as minimum bills) to, and strategies, for addressing any such obstacles.
3. Investigate the ramifications of consolidation on waste water operations and existing agreements (e.g. the Tri-Town Agreement for waste water treatment). Consider the potential opportunity for the acquisition of the waste water facility on the IBM-Technology Park campus.
4. Review with affected Department Heads-Senior Staff
5. Devise implementation plan—if or as warranted
6. Review with legislative bodies—if or as warranted

8.3 Public Works/Streets-Highways/Storm Water

The Public Works, Highways and Stormwater services area is a complex mosaic of high profile services for the community. Everyone wants their street plowed in the Winter and no one wants to drive on poorly maintained streets or sidewalks. High quality potable water needs to be available “on demand,” and this part of the community’s service delivery network is responsible for maintaining water quality in the community and beyond our borders. The Village and the Town currently perform many similar functions, but each have different systems in place to manage and supervise the delivery of these services.

During our interviews with the two Public Works/Highway Departments, several shared-service synergies were identified. These included shared equipment and engineering review of capital projects. During the interviews, it was clear that both departments were concerned about sharing or consolidating services carefully, making the transition as smoothly and seamlessly “as possible” because services in this category minimizing are very important to all citizens. It was pointed out by at least one interviewee that it is important to be fair and provide the same services for all. Currently, differing management and supervisory approaches, as well as regulation, in each of the municipalities tends to be roadblocks for more service sharing. There is a definite concern that merging Public Works/Street Departments would slow the response actions to the community and require the use of a different business model than may currently be in place in one or both entities. The possibility of decision making being taken away from the workers and having to wait for a shared department manager to decide is expected to delay

decisions. Public Works has its hands in everything and is able to provide an immediate response to customer concerns. Perhaps it is the balance between what the residents need versus what they think they need.

However, it was also noted that the dynamics that have operated against greater sharing or consolidation of services appear to be changing. These run the range from the increasing burdens of addressing storm water issues to perhaps establishing a single department with two service districts to respect the long-standing differing cultures, and providing the opportunity for more collaboration to gradually work its way toward providing more shared services. In some utility functions, there is pre-existing debt that will have to be reconciled. The path to a consolidated approach would likely involve surcharges for users assigned to that debt. Debt service (including principal and interest) would be paid by rates, charges, or special assessments in accordance with “best practices” approaches and state law.²¹

There is a draft plan that has been developed over the years that would, if implemented, facilitate the consolidation of at least some of these functions. If the legislative Bodies supported more shared or consolidated services, there is a blueprint that could be further refined and put in place to advance the process over a relatively short period of time. Stormwater has been a logical place for increased collaboration, and this could be expanded without a great deal of additional planning efforts in a way that could maintain current services packages for two Public Works/Highway Districts. Further advances could be made from there after the initial transition period.

8.3.1 Suggested Action Steps

1. Undertake a collaborative and comprehensive review of the most recent version of the plan to consolidate the Village and Town departments.
2. Update the plan as needed to fully-consider recent developments since the last update and potential future staffing-administrative personnel changes that could affect the consolidation effort.
3. Investigate the efficacy of utilizing a two district approach which fully respects but advances towards harmonizing the differing service packages of Village and Town outside the Village areas.
4. Identify all fiscal potential issues associated with a consolidated department and develop a financing system that is consistent with smart governance, consistent with all applicable

²¹ There is long-term infrastructure debt outstanding for the Town (supported by all taxpayers—including both Town and Village residents) and there will be an issuance of \$3.3 million in infrastructure improvement debt supported by the Village taxpayer in July 2014. This debt will be 20 year debt and will likely have to be supported by a surcharge on taxpayers in the Village unless there was an affirmative vote by the voters outside of the Village to assume financial responsibility for this debt.

state laws governing user fees and charges, and financial synergies and potential impediments to a consolidated department for Public Works, Highways and Stormwater (e.g. any impact on the grants strategy for a combined department or state support for highways?).

5. Review with affected Department Heads-Senior Staff
6. Devise implementation plan—if or as warranted
7. Review with legislative bodies—if or as warranted

8.4 Fire Department

While not attributed to the actual Fire Department interviews, the merging of the two departments appears to be “an elephant in the room” to the Shared Services Assessment Team. Having two Battalion chiefs report to one Manager will quickly bring these two separate departments together. An initial plan to put the two departments together exists and was drafted during an earlier round of community discussions on the subject of smart, more efficient governance.

Both Fire Chiefs indicated that, while there are cultural differences between the two departments, the opportunities for shared practices exist and that they could move in that direction. For example, cross training, operating procedures, standards for equipment, and a unified plan for equipment capital budgeting all could be addressed through a combined effort. There may be additional opportunities for grant money if the departments were consolidated.

According to our discussions, the easy part of consolidating the two departments was in the area of day to day operations. There is already an impressive amount of sharing/cooperation in meeting the community’s fire protection-fire safety needs. Consolidating budgets may not be as easy as joint operations. This is mainly due to the current wage structure, expectations of station coverage, and the requirements of day-to-day administration.

From the interviews, it was clear that both departments struggle with acquiring/keeping trained personnel; keeping current on standards; and obtaining needed resources to retain trained personnel. Many times, the community’s departments lose well-trained personnel to other departments in Vermont and across the New England region because there are few full-time professional opportunities within the community. This is perhaps best characterized as a “cost” of having the departments structured as they currently are—particularly in the Town outside the Village.

8.4.1 Suggested Action Steps

1. Undertake a collaborative and comprehensive review of the most recent version of the plan to consolidate the Village and Town departments.

2. Update the plan as needed to fully consider recent developments since the last update of that plan and with respect to future staffing/administrative personnel changes that could impact the consolidation effort.
3. Investigate the efficacy of utilizing a two-district approach which fully respects the differing approaches to fire for the Village and Town outside-the-Village areas—including cross training, operating procedures, standards for equipment, and a unified plan for equipment capital budgeting. Review any state or any operational-training certification impediments to a consolidated department.
4. Identify any cultural or operational impediments to consolidation and develop strategies to address them.
5. Review with affected Department Heads-Senior Staff.
6. Devise implementation plan—if warranted.
7. Review with legislative bodies—if or as warranted.

8.5 Parks and Recreation

The message from our interviews with Village staff, and Town Parks and Recreation staff, and the Prudential Committee pointed to the very high profile nature of programs and the many issues that would need to be dealt with to increase services sharing and perhaps consolidating programs. Interviewees pointed to how many of the programs offered by each department were more complementary, than redundant or duplicative (although there is clearly some duplication), many times serving different populations within the community. At the same time, interviewees responded that if they were to start over from scratch to design a system for a community with roughly 22,000 residents, the current services delivery network would not be how it would be designed—assuming efficient and smart governance of programs for residents were the objectives of the system.

Currently, the largest obstacle to consolidation of programs or more shared programming is the fear that change might not be well received among users in the community. Some of this concern seemed to be grounded in “typical” fear or opposition to change of any kind from current programmatic norms. At least some of the concern about greater collaboration is tied to political concerns—that the governing or legislative Bodies would not support creative thinking in this regard. This is true, even though greater sharing or cooperation might reduce confusion among users, and potentially help to protect services quality by better leveraging the best parts and competencies of both programs. One interviewee flatly stated that” “...if the Boards wanted it, it would be done.”

Currently, a financial issue complicating service consolidation that would need to be addressed: the final 5½ years of the Maple Street recreation facility debt. The current loan balance is

\$630,000²² and this debt is scheduled to be retired in December, 2019. Prior to retirement, it is likely that there will need to be two recreation-park districts where surcharges would need to be developed—consistent with state law²³—that would equitably spread the remaining principal and interest payments between Village taxpayers and non-Village users. In our view, this would not be a complicated process, and the entire issue would be moot within a relatively short period of 5½ years anyway.

8.5.1 Suggested Action Steps

1. Identify and review a list of opportunities for programmatic collaboration.
2. Investigate the efficacy of utilizing a two district approach which fully respects the differing approaches to programs for the Village and Town outside the Village patrons, and identify any financial issues (e.g. the existing debt on the Maple Street facility) associated with a consolidated department and how to address them.
3. Identify any cultural or operational impediments to consolidation and develop strategies to address them.
5. Review with affected Department Heads-Senior Staff.
6. Devise implementation plan—if warranted.
7. Review with legislative bodies—if or as warranted.

8.6 Planning and Zoning

The overarching message from these interviews is there does not appear to be consistent values between the Town and Village. Interviewees indicated that there were definite synergies to be had by combining parts, if not all, of the Town and Village planning and zoning functions. Interviewees indicated this would be particularly helpful to aid in forward thinking and planning. A challenge is how to keep things alive by having constant community ideas flowing and provide channels for consistent communication from, and to, the community. This ties with the obligation to have increased and continuous public outreach to gain insight on what the community wants and needs. There is a need to help the Boards to be policy makers, NOT detail managers. Interviewees also indicated there is a need for more holistic approach to green spaces; walking/biking paths and safe routes to schools.

²² As of June 30, 2014.

²³ For example, taxpayers in a municipality cannot be compelled to pay debt service on municipal borrowing without an affirmative vote by affect taxpayers (those that are expected to pay debt service). In this instance, the payment of debt service costs on the Maple Street facility would require an affirmative vote by a majority of taxpayers in the Town outside the Village in order for those tax payers to pay the above-referenced debt service costs. This would be an unlikely event in the opinion of the authors—thereby underpinning the two district recreation-park districts observation.

Efficiencies identified: sharing the Town Engineer; sharing the Village Grant Writer and write grants for shared improvements (e.g. for the CCMPO sidewalk program?). Regulation can be a challenge. There are different rules and regulations that each municipality follows. However, these challenges do not seem insurmountable.

In the Service Assessment Team’s view, this could be perhaps most effectively dealt with by establishing two planning districts within the community—just as there are now within the two individual municipalities. Once the plan for the Village Planning District was passed, this plan would be automatically incorporated into the plan for the entire Town of Essex as a community—similar to the way the “approved” Transportation Improvement Plan for the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission, conducting the Chittenden County Metropolitan Planning Organization (CCMPO)’s business, is incorporated into the Transportation Improvement Plan for the State of Vermont as a whole. The community also could investigate the efficacy of establishing a separate Planning Commission and Development Review Board—with commissioners from each planning commission self-selecting (with legislative Boards’ approval) based on their interest in planning versus development review.

8.6.1 Suggested Action Steps

1. Identify and review a list of opportunities for greater Village and Town-outside-of-the-Village planning and development review collaboration. Examine the pros and cons of a single grant writer for a consolidated community development effort—both inside and outside a prospective Village planning district.
2. Investigate the efficacy of utilizing a two planning district approach—one for the Village zone and one for the Town-outside-the-Village zone—which incorporates the differing character and differing approaches to programs to planning and development for the Village and Town outside the Village.
3. Investigate the efficacy of utilizing a separate Planning Commission-Development Review Board model for a shard services approach. Allow current Planning Commissioners in each zone to self-select based on incumbent commissioners’ interest in either planning or development review functions for the community.
5. Review with affected Department Heads-Senior Staff.
6. Devise implementation plan—if warranted.
7. Review with legislative bodies—if or as warranted.

8.7 Library

Based on our interviews, the libraries self-identify more as individual services than as combined/shared resources for the community. Both are culturally different and have different levels of staff, money, and visitors. The Village library (Brownell) is in the center of the village

and most community members can walk if they reside within the Village. Numerous Brownell users do not even know they are able to use the Town library (commonly referred to as the “Essex Free Library”). Town library users generally drive/ride a bike.

While both see themselves as the “heart of the community” both offer different resources to the community. Brownell has a very large community room available to provide programs that reach a large group of people all at once. This room can also be used for organizations not connected with the library. Essex Free library offers creative writing workshops in schools and at the library and has language learning software available for patrons.

At this point, infrastructure appears to be a major roadblock to a shared/consolidated services approach. This infrastructure takes several forms: (1) separate boards, (2) different staffing levels and resource requirements (budgets), as well as (3) an apparent the desire to continue to be different. This appears to be based on “tradition” and “physical distance” between the two libraries—both of which were identified as major pitfalls to combining these two important community service providers. On the other side of the coin, both organizations expressed a desire and shared interest in having more joint/shared programs for the communities; team building for staff; and for sharing staff. This may be indicative of an important initial step towards greater cooperation for this important part of the community services asset base.

8.7.1 Suggested Action Steps

1. Identify and review a list of opportunities for programmatic collaboration.
2. Identify any cultural or operational impediments to consolidation of programs and develop strategies to address them.
5. Review with affected Department Heads-Senior Staff.
6. Devise implementation plan—if warranted.
7. Review with legislative bodies—if or as warranted.

8.8 Other

There are a number of additional Boards and Commissions that were beyond the scope of this study that would require some additional thought. Our study did not include those aspects of shared services/consolidation. Our approach is that there is nothing in those areas that appears to be impediments to greater shared or consolidated services. There are others, such as the Board of Civil Authority, which would need to be addressed as part of broader discussions regarding any changes in governance that may arise subsequent to this current shared-consolidated services investigation.

8.8.1 Suggested Action Steps

1. Identify and review a list of opportunities for Board oversight and responsibilities streamlining.

2. Identify any cultural or operational impediments to consolidation of programs and develop strategies to address them.
3. Identify any statutory or legal obstacles to re-organizing and realigning responsibilities for a consolidated services model.
4. Review with affected Department Heads-Senior Staff.
5. Devise implementation plan—if warranted.
6. Review with legislative bodies—if or as warranted.

Attachment 1: Results of the Employee Survey