

# Heart & Soul of Essex Neighborhood Conversations Report

COMMUNITY  
CONNECTIONS  
EDUCATION &  
THOUGHTFUL GROWTH  
SAFETY  
LOCAL  
HEALTH  
RECREATION  
COMMERCIAL

Spring 2013



HEART  
& SOUL  
— OF —  
ESSEX

## **Neighborhood Conversations Report**

### **Introduction**

This is an exciting moment for Essex. As we mark the celebration of our 250<sup>th</sup> birthday, we can feel the sense of possibility in the air.

Residents are participating in important ways in our community's civic life. With the help of community leaders, we have begun to revitalize our historic village center with a successful farmers market, new businesses, and other efforts to breathe new life into this part of our community. We are running for office, and serving on committees. We are organizing to create new resources (such as a dog park and natural playground) and to ensure the thoughtful stewardship of existing resources (such as Indian Brook Reservoir and Saxon Hill forest).

Municipal leaders are working to improve collaboration between the village and the town outside the village. Most recently, they have embarked on a yearlong experiment to have a shared manager for all of Essex. Following years of joint effort, a new police facility will soon be constructed. At Essex High School, the Center for Technology is thriving and a new Arts Academy is underway. Our libraries and recreation departments continue to create many opportunities for our community to come together for learning, fun and celebration.

Significant new businesses such as Green Mountain Coffee Roasters and Regal Gymnastics Academy are coming to town. New family owned businesses have opened, and the IBM campus is becoming a diversified center for technology and innovation.

Our community, with its long history as a hub for travelers, is becoming more diverse as we welcome a new wave of immigrants, including a recent influx of New Americans from Nepal.

At the same time, we face important questions about our future. How do we manage growth in ways that enhance our urban and rural areas while preserving our community treasures? How do we continue to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of services inside and outside of the village? How do we ensure that long time residents, newcomers, and people from all walks of life can afford to live in our community? How do we ensure that all students succeed as the number and diversity of young people in our schools increases? In the midst of change, how do we reach out to new neighbors, while maintaining the meaningful personal connections we have with one another?

Our community has been given a unique opportunity, thanks to a grant from the Orton Family Foundation, to engage in a process of exploration that will help us arrive at thoughtful answers to the complex questions we face. Through the Heart & Soul of Essex, we have been engaging community members in multiple ways to learn what our shared values are, and to better understand our collective hopes for the future.

An important part of this exploration took the form of a series of 43 Neighborhood Conversations, held in living rooms, libraries, schools and businesses throughout our community. The results of these two-hour dialogues are outlined in the following report. We hope this detailed accounting of almost 350 voices from our community will provide a useful guide as we make decisions about our future.

## Neighborhood Conversations Report Executive Summary

### Participants said...

*"[the conversation] was well orchestrated and the facilitators did a great job of moving the group through the different stages of the meeting"*

*"It was wonderful connecting with my neighbors and discovering common goals for our community"*

*"I have never been given the opportunity to feel so much a part of a community and have my ideas heard as I did by being a part of this conversation"*

*"It was helpful to have a list of values and recognize my own personal priorities as well as hear from others"*

During the fall of 2012 and early winter of 2013, Heart and Soul of Essex held 43 neighborhood conversations, involving almost 350 people who live or work in our community. People met in living rooms, libraries, and businesses. They met in the outermost reaches of rural Essex and in the very center of the village. Many different people participated, including youth and elders, elected officials, New Americans, members of the business community and more.

These structured, yet intimate two-hour conversations, provided an opportunity for participants to share their experiences living or working in Essex. People identified what's most important and shared their hopes for the future. Each conversation was unique and people expressed a wide range of opinions and hopes for the future. Even so, we discovered a clear set of shared values including, Education, Community Connections, Safety, Thoughtful Growth, Health & Recreation, and Local Economy. \*

So, what matters most to the people of Essex? We value our connections with each other. Our neighborly traditions keep us safe, sustain us during challenging times and bring us together for celebration and fun. We see ourselves as a community that values education and learning. We want to be a welcoming place and aspire to become more culturally aware as our community becomes more diverse. We take pride in many community assets, including our highly regarded schools, libraries and recreation departments. We want to see these institutions continue to improve.

We value the urban and rural aspects of our community. We want to see balanced future growth, which includes a diverse mix of housing options, economic development and conservation of open space. We hope for improved infrastructure that will ease traffic, increase our safety and connect all parts of the community together. We are especially passionate about the prospect of a well-connected system of sidewalks and bike paths throughout all of Essex.

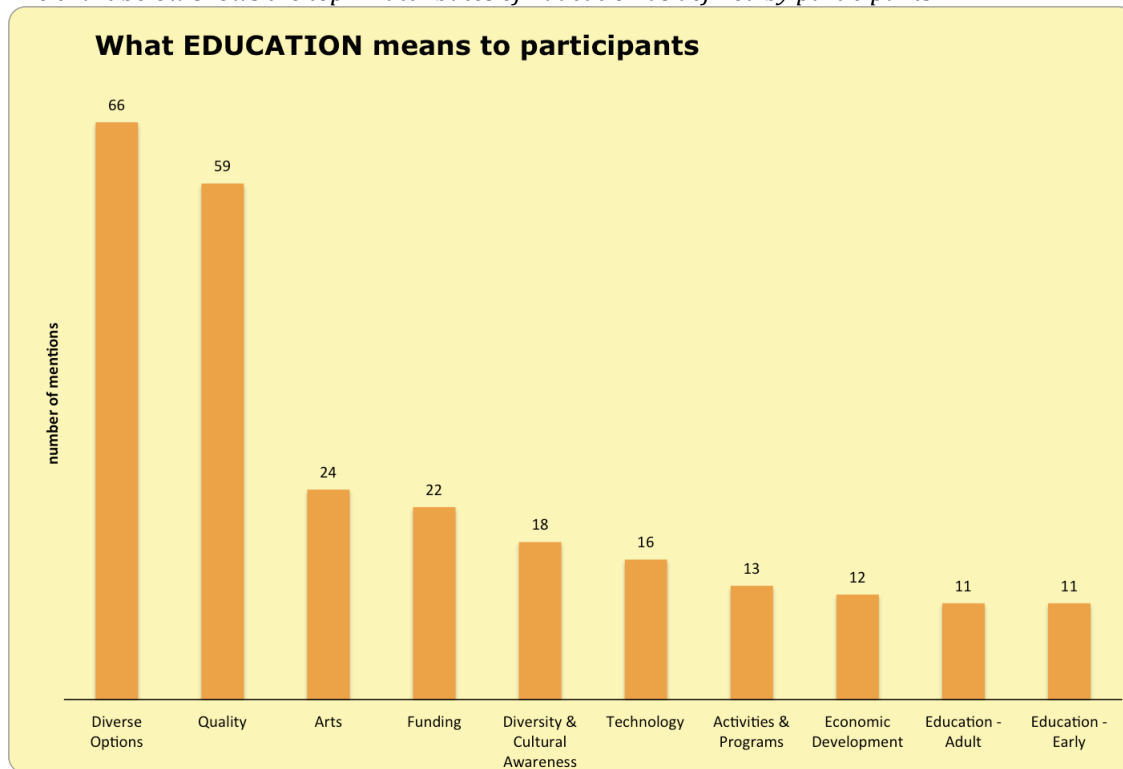
We can say with assurance that the commitment to making Essex the best it can be runs deep among the people we've talked with so far. Those who live or work here love this community and want to contribute their voices and their energy towards creating a successful future.

*\* Recently, Heart & Soul of Essex fielded a survey that was completed by 540 people (including 352 people who have not yet participated in any previous Heart & Soul of Essex activities). The survey affirms that values expressed during the Neighborhood Conversations also resonate with a wider group of community members.*

## EDUCATION

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

*The chart below shows the top 10 attributes of Education as defined by participants*



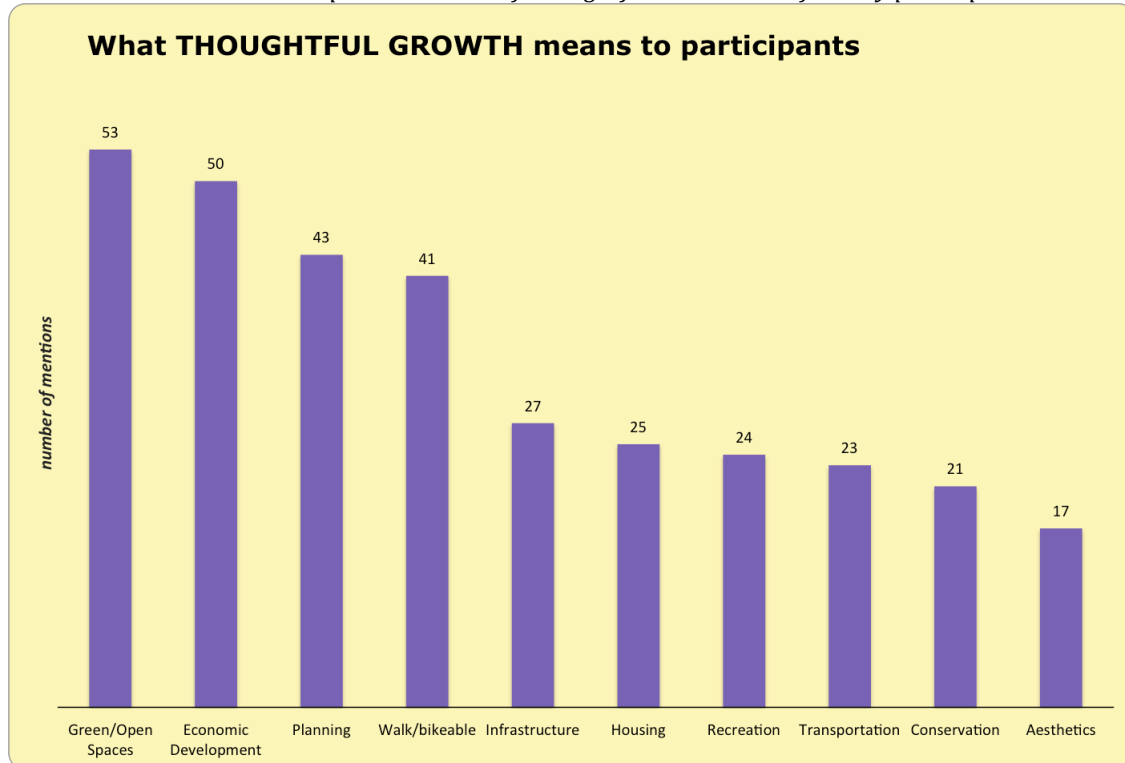
Participants describe EDUCATION as

- Diverse educational experiences for people of all ages that recognize different learning styles and includes academics, arts, culture, sports, life skills, language, and more
- High quality public education, which features high standards and recognition and support of excellent educators
- Community supported budgets that provide robust funding for schools, teachers and materials, and maintain property values
- Curricula that increase awareness and knowledge of other cultures and foreign languages
- Access to current information, media, and resources: libraries, internet, technology, e-books
- Cooperation with the business community to foster internships and business skills development

## THOUGHTFUL GROWTH

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

*The chart below shows the top 10 attributes of Thoughtful Growth as defined by participants*



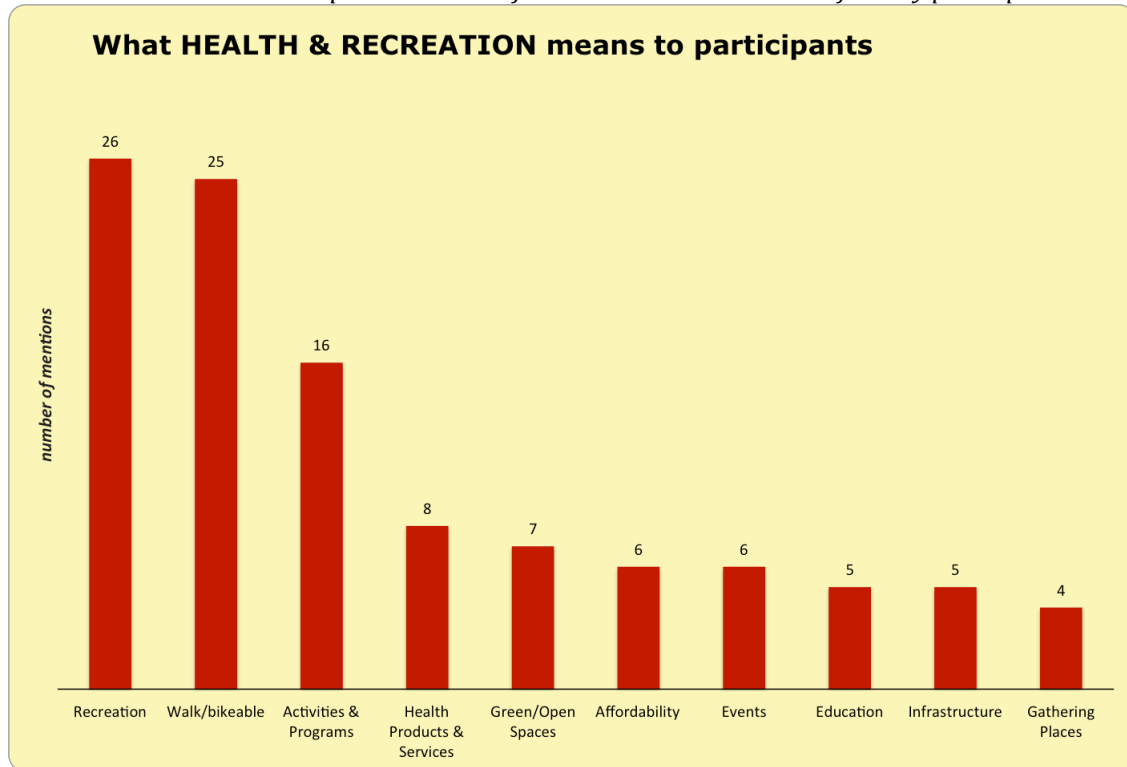
Participants describe THOUGHTFUL GROWTH as

- A balance of housing, business, and the preservation and maintenance of a variety of open spaces, including forests, trails, parks, and recreation fields
- Economic development that provides gov't and community support for a diverse mix of start-ups and local businesses as well as the development of green businesses
- Balanced and thoughtful planning & zoning with citizen input
- A variety of housing options including affordable housing
- A connected, coordinated transportation system that increases efficient traffic flow, and adds public transportation, walking and biking options
- Conservation of open spaces through a land trust or land acquisition fund
- A focus on aesthetics including landscaping, flowers, and trees

## HEALTH & RECREATION

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

*The chart below shows the top 10 attributes of Health and Recreation as defined by participants*



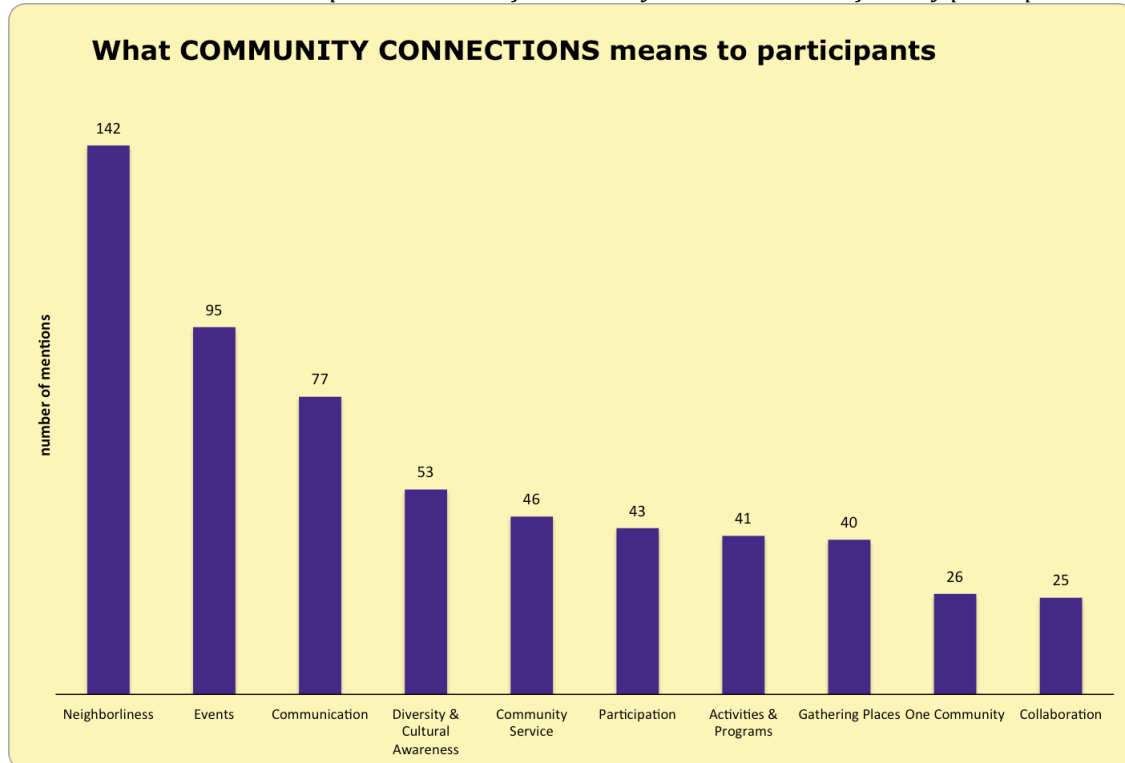
Participants describe HEALTH & RECREATION as

- Support for strong recreation departments
- Biking and walking friendly, including the presence of lanes, paths, trails, sidewalks, and connectivity of these across the community
- Diverse year-round recreational opportunities for all age groups, including community events
- A variety of recreation facilities including pools, parks, fields, and shared community spaces
- Access to health providers
- Access to healthy, local food
- Affordable and accessible opportunities for physical activity
- Maintenance of open spaces and parks, particularly Indian Brook Reservoir
- Health, fitness and nutrition education

## COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

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

*The chart below shows the top 10 attributes of Community Connections as defined by participants*



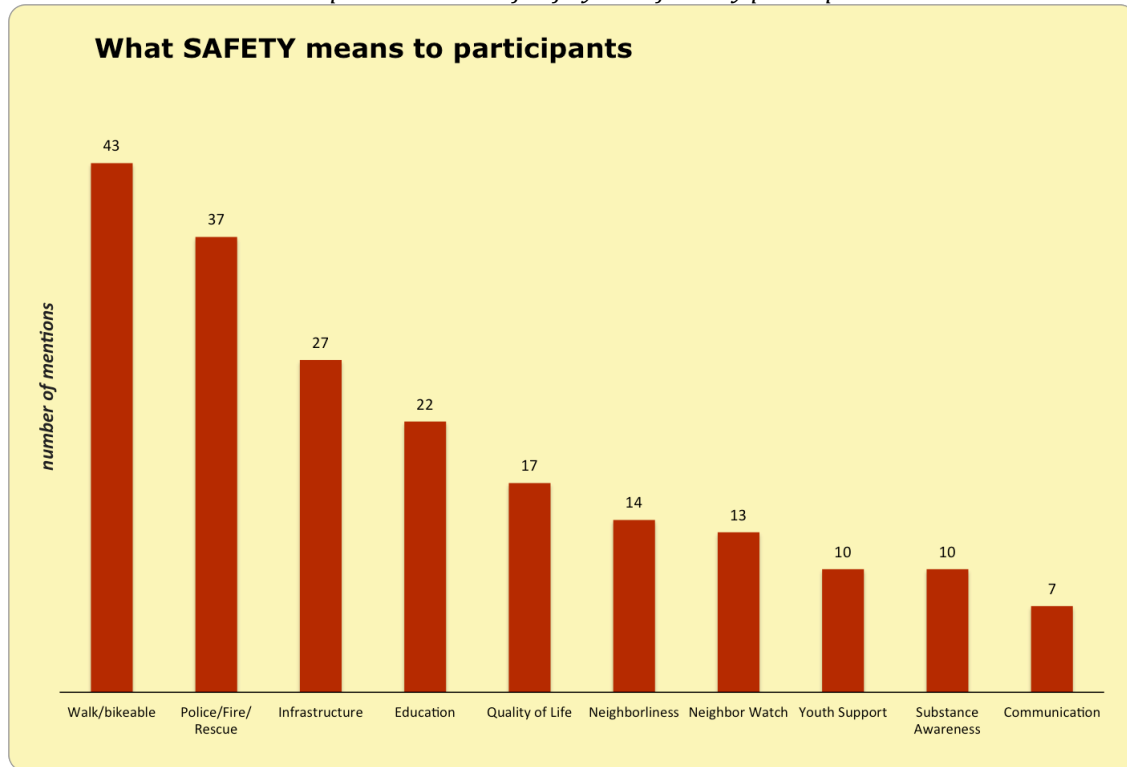
Participants describe COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS as

- Neighbors and community members treating each other with kindness and respect, and helping each other through good times and bad
- Formal and informal opportunities to be together at community gatherings and events
- Communication and engagement through Front Porch Forum, local newspaper, community directories, maps, and community conversations
- Acceptance, inclusion and respect for all people across race, ethnicity, gender and age, and increased knowledge of and responsiveness to people from different cultural backgrounds
- Variety of opportunities to volunteer and engage in community
- Participation in many facets of the community's life including Town Meeting, committees, community discussions, faith community and events
- The presence of gathering places, such as a coffee shop or community center
- Shared services and unified planning between village and town governments and collaboration among government, education, business and residents

## SAFETY

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

*The chart below shows the top 10 attributes of Safety as defined by participants*



Participants describe SAFETY as

- The presence of physical infrastructure that supports safety, including sidewalks, bike lanes, street lighting and cameras
- A robust first responder system (police, fire and rescue) and a police department that is engaged, active, visible, and strong
- Education and activities that help all of us know how to be safe, smart and make healthy choices
- A connected community where neighbors know, care and watch out for each other
- Substance abuse education, prevention and services
- Activities and support for our youth and young adults,
- Openness and communication about safety issues through venues like Front Porch Forum



## LOCAL ECONOMY

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

*The chart below shows the top 7 attributes of Local Economy as defined by participants\**



Participants describe LOCAL ECONOMY as

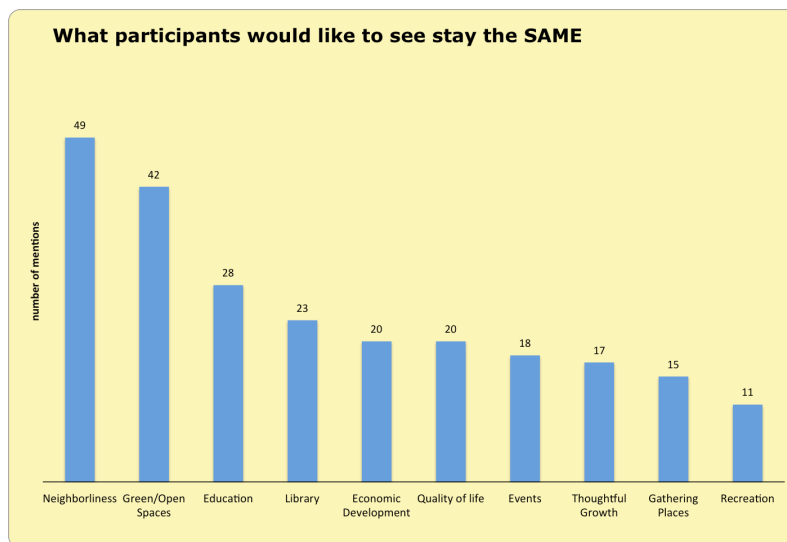
- The presence of a variety of small, local, “family” businesses
- Economic opportunity that is supported by local government as well as a strong, skilled, well-educated workforce
- Diverse, high quality jobs at a range of businesses, from small, locally owned companies to large businesses such as IBM
- Support for creative businesses and incubator space
- Employers who are responsible to their employees and engage with the community

*\* During the Neighborhood Conversations, people were asked to prioritize a list of fifteen values. This list was created based on participant’s comments during the Heart & Soul of Essex Launch Party on September 25, 2012. The local economy was not identified during the launch party, but came up frequently during the conversations. We believe that if this value had been included on the original list, it would have received a comparable number of votes as the other values identified as top priorities for the community.*

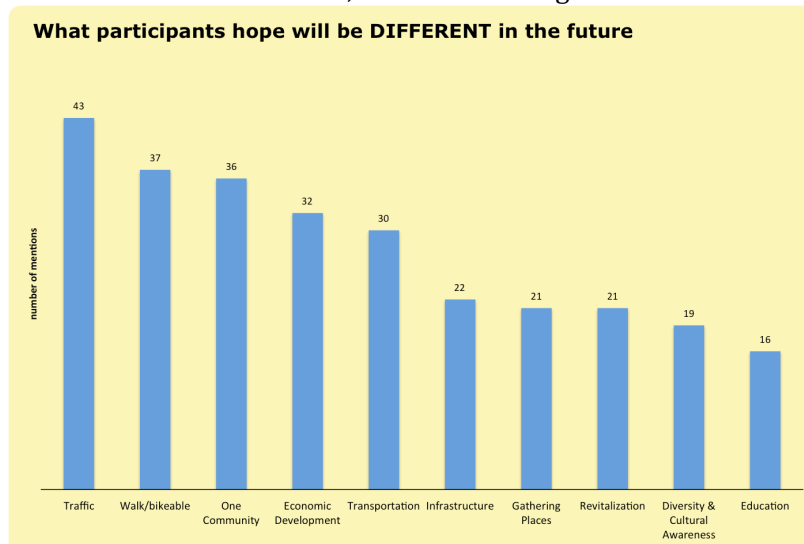
## LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

When we asked participants to think ahead to the future, several strong themes emerged. Not surprisingly, these themes closely mirror the top values that were identified during the conversations.

Participants want to hold onto our traditions of neighborliness and deep connections with each other. They want to maintain our open spaces and the presence of both urban and rural environments. They want to maintain or develop a set of highly valued assets, including our schools, libraries and recreation infrastructure. Finally, participants want to continue to have many opportunities to gather together during community events.



Participants also hope to see changes. New and improved infrastructure that mitigates traffic, connects all corners of the community, and provides more opportunities for walking and biking is a shared hope of many. Participants also want to see us develop and improve already valuable assets such as schools and libraries. They hope for better, more coordinated planning and economic development. Participants also hope for a community that becomes more diverse, more welcoming and more culturally aware.

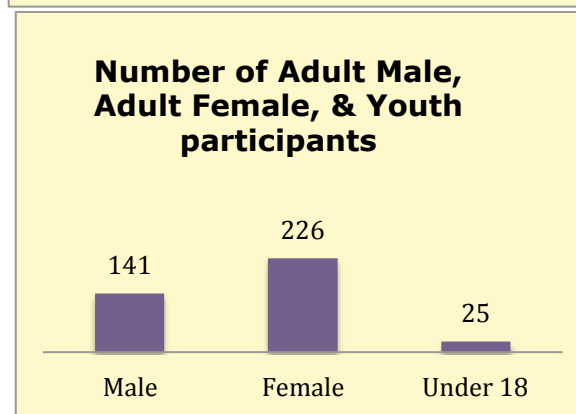
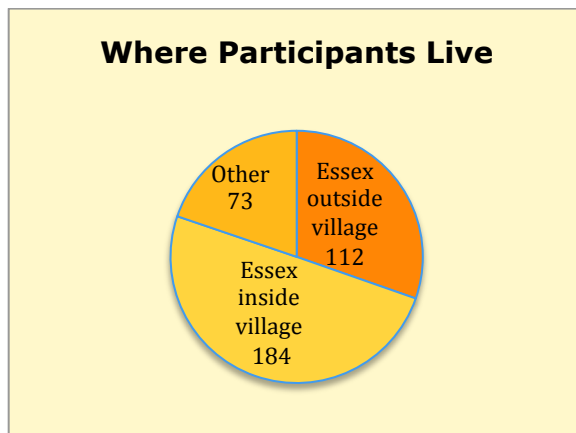


## DEMOGRAPHICS

### Who Participated in the Neighborhood Conversations?

Close to 350 people participated in 43 neighborhood conversations. We held face-to-face conversations in all nine Front Porch Forum neighborhoods, and we also talked with people in a variety of “affinity” groups. Some people participated in more than one conversation.

Group	Number of Participants		
ESSEX CENTER	23	PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDR	12
BUTLER CORNERS	9	FAITH	9
COUNTRYSIDE	7	PLANNING COMMISSIONS	13
ESSEX WEST	5	SPORTS	11
THE FORT	8	DIFFERENTLY ABLED	17
FAIRVIEW FARMS	8	LGBTQ	12
FIVE CORNERS NORTH	22	GOVERNMENT	33
FIVE CORNERS SOUTH	9	ARTIST	5
RURAL ESSEX	5	LIBRARY PATRONS	13
PEOPLE OF COLOR	6	ESSEX CHIPS BOARD AND STAFF	11
NEW AMERICANS	17	OTHER	22
BUSINESS / ROTARY	28	FACILITATORS	31
YOUTH	19	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>369</b>
YOUNG ADULTS	14		



## PROCESS WE USED TO IDENTIFY THE 6 PRIORITY VALUES

During the conversations, people were presented with a list of fifteen possible community values (these values were identified during Heart & Soul's September 25, 2012 Launch Party). Participants discussed these values and were invited to add values that were important to them, but not included on the original list. People identified over 80 possible values. Each participant was invited to vote for the three values they felt were most important for the community. We added all the votes from the 43 conversations. Below are the top 15 values.

Value	Total votes
EDUCATION	238
COMMUNITY	176
SAFETY	157
THOUGHTFUL GROWTH	134
HEALTH AND RECREATION	128
NEIGHBORLINESS	127
OPEN SPACES	127
FAMILY FRIENDLINESS	83
DIVERSITY	80
OUR YOUTH	76
COLLABORATION	67
CREATIVITY	51
BEING WELCOMING	47
OUR HISTORY	37
ECONOMY	42

Participants were also invited to define what these values meant to them. In reviewing the definitions, we discovered similar definitions for many of the different values. This enabled us to combine some of the values that rose to the surface. The result is six top values that represent what matters most to the people who participated.

<b>Value</b>	<b>Includes</b>
EDUCATION	Education Our Youth
COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS	Community Neighborliness Family friendliness Diversity Being Welcoming Collaboration
SAFETY	Safety
THOUGHTFUL GROWTH	Thoughtful Growth Open Spaces
HEALTH & RECREATION	Health & Recreation
LOCAL ECONOMY*	Economy Jobs/Business Responsible Employer

\*The economy wasn't on the original list of values. Even so, it was added by participants and received a significant number of votes. In our judgment, it is likely to have been one of the top vote getters if it had been included on the original list, so we include it as one of the top values.