

Essex Free Library Strategic Plan for Fiscal 2025-2028

The Mission

"Your road to discovery, enrichment, and
community."

- Essex Free Library

The Essex Free Library, located at 1 Browns River Road in Historic Essex Center, enriches and strengthens the community by providing free access to a diverse collection of books, resources, technology, digital items, equipment, and more. The Library provides educational and recreational opportunities for *all* community members through a variety of free programs, events, classes, and workshops. It promotes an inclusive environment and offers a safe space where people of all backgrounds can come together as a community. The Essex Free Library is for everyone.

The Essex Free Library issues library cards, also known as Homecards, to Essex Town residents. Homecards can be used at any library in the Homecard system, a cooperative lending program of twenty-eight libraries in northwestern Vermont. Through the Library's website and online catalog, www.essexfreelibrary.org, patrons can log into their library accounts to request and renew items.

As of September 2023, the Library houses a collection of 35,817 items, including books, movies, music, books on CD, magazines, and more. Materials not owned by the Essex Free Library can be requested from other libraries through the statewide interlibrary loan service. In addition to physical materials, the Library offers a collection of digital resources. Essex Free Library patrons have access to thousands of downloadable eBooks, audiobooks, music, videos, and more. Patrons can also take free online classes and learn a new language using the digital resource, Mango.

The Library offers a "Library of Things," a collection of nontraditional library items that patrons can check out. These nontraditional items include snowshoes, laptops, hotspots, binoculars, sewing machines, ukuleles, guitars, a projector, a telescope, and more. The Library also circulates a variety of museum and local attraction passes that give library patrons entry at free or reduced rates.

Library programs are offered several days each week for patrons of all ages. Programs include children's storytimes, musical programs, technology assistance, gaming groups, adult and children's crafts, book discussions, author events, STEAM activities, poetry circles, storywalks, Zentangle, Lego Club, and presenters and performers throughout the year. Through generous funding from the Friends of the Essex Free Library, the Library offers an exciting and dynamic reading program each summer for both children and adults.

The Library is a community distribution center not just for books and media but for other important resources such as free Covid tests and gun locks. It responds to community needs and collaborates with other local organizations, nonprofits, schools,

and childcare centers.

The Library offers five public computer workstations with internet access, Wi-Fi for visitors with personal devices, and a printer/copier/fax machine for patron use. Essex Free Library's helpful staff is always willing to provide book recommendations, reference services, and technology assistance. All are welcome to enjoy the Library's space and services.

History

The history of the Essex Free Library is one of fortitude and perseverance. The original Essex Free Library (EFL) was established in 1808 by the Essex Congregationalist Society. Based on the principle that "public libraries are of the greatest benefit, as it enables all concerned to acquire literary knowledge and thereby become better citizens and more useful members of society" it was housed in a wooden church/ meeting house on the site where the current library resides. The library remained at this location until 1838 when fire destroyed it. Not to be deterred the ECS then reestablished the library in a new location in the side room of the Town Hall.

For several years much debate ensued over the need for a larger facility for the Library. The women of the Essex Outlook Club were in agreement and sought a means for funding this venture. In 1931 a subscription contest was announced in the Burlington Daily News, the prize - a Packard automobile- would be awarded to the individual who secured the highest number of subscriptions. With that a fundraising scheme was drafted by the women.. At the behest of Mrs. R. E. Mayo the women identified the golden opportunity to acquire the car and then sell it for the necessary funds to support their library venture. They won the car and with that monies and a number of private donations the Library was reestablished in the Village Green where the Public Works Department now stands. The women supported the operation of the library for several years at a cost of \$50/ annum. But given the resources needed to continually meet this commitment by a small group, the women approached the Town in 1936 to assume financial responsibility for the library.

The library remained in this location until 1986 when the the Town began to search for a use for the brick church building across the road from the Village Green. The following year the Town approved funding to convert the Church complex to a library facility. Thus, the Essex Free Library had a new location in 1989 and remains there to this day.

Strategic Planning Process and results

The first order of business for the committee was to collect and analyze information from the community regarding the type of services and programs the library should or should not provide. A survey was drafted and administered at the Town Meeting in February 2024, in person at the Library and online. A total of 200 responses were received.

The following plan utilizes the results of the survey to outline a strategy for the library for the next 3 years to meet the ever changing needs of our community.

The results of the survey indicated the following:

1. The overwhelming majority of respondents hold library cards (96.4%). Those who do not indicate that they either obtained their reading material online (30%) or that they preferred to purchase their own (20%).
2. The library services are very well used, with print books still being the most popular service.
3. When asked 'What barriers discourage you from using the library services?' 53.3% said NO barriers but 25.6% of respondents said parking was an issue.
4. When asked what services or programs they would like to see at the library the most commonly requested improvements are:
 - a) More cozy corners to read in.
 - b) Programs geared to mid aged adults and families.
 - c) Tech stations like Cricut and 3D printers.
 - d) More park passes.
 - e) Guest speakers to include local and state representatives & "Meet the author"
 - f) Increasing the library collection.

The issues the library has with many of these requests is the lack of space. We are out growing the space that we have and there is literally no place to put another cozy corner or a 3D printer.

5. Preferences for timing of library programs were weekday morning (40.1%) and afternoons (47.3%) but there were a significant number of people that wanted evening programs (37%) and Saturday (52%).
6. When asked about the library building the following were mentioned: lack of space for books and other library materials, quiet reading corners and a lack of a community meeting space.

Opportunity/Service Points

The Strategic Planning Working group met to categorize the opportunity/service points to guide it over the next three years. These points are:

- A) Parking and accessibility: The library currently has 14 parking spaces + 4 at the historical society for a total of 18; which is 3 short of the national standard of 1 space for 250 sq feet of space. We should have 21 spaces.
 - 1) Relabel parking at the historical society (this represents 4 spaces)
 - 2) Ask staff to park across the street or Memorial Hall if possible.
 - 3) Post signs to point to parking at Memorial Hall or across the street.
 - 4) Any way to squeeze in a few more parking spaces?

B) Facility:

- 1) Really needs to be bigger! Explore possible solutions to expand the building again.
- 2) Collaborate with other town departments and outside groups to find/use satellite spaces like Memorial Hall.
- 3) Shed in the side yard for storage?
- 4) Work with the town committees to explore the possibility of building a new library at the new town Center.
- 5) Use the garden more.
- 6) Develop plan for garden maintenance.

C) Services:

- 1) Outreach to seniors, survey senior living establishments.
- 2) Library of things suggestions.
- 3) Reduce Holds for popular books and ebooks.
- 4) Encourage volunteers to work with the Friends of the Library group.

D) Programs:

- 1) Evening Adult (not senior) programs
- 2) Weekend family programs (like sled dogs)
- 3) Teen/Tween book club
- 4) Work with other groups for events - Uncommon, Phoenix, Movie Theater
- 5) More passes for museums and parks, evaluate sign up procedure.
- 6) Continue to work collaboratively with schools to develop programs.
- 7) Host 3-4 events per year of interest to the community. These could include but not exclusive to visiting and local authors; State and local representatives speakers; special medical topics etc.

E) Development:

- 1. Friends updates at all Trustee meetings.
- 2. Explore with the friends a development campaign for fundraising/grant writing for possible new building
- 3. 2029 is the 40th Anniversary in the current building - How to celebrate?