



ESSEX LIBRARY  
ASSOCIATION

Strategic Plan  
FY2022/2023 – 2025/2026

October 2021

It has been my great pleasure to work with fellow trustees and our executive director on an undertaking as meaningful as charting a roadmap for the Essex Library's future. Over the past nine months, the board has gathered input from a wide swath of the community, looked at the data, consulted with staff, and examined our own hopes and values in discussions around the question of how the library can best meet community needs in the years to come. The resulting strategic plan is contained herein.

The strategic planning process began with a look at what is essential about the library. As is clear to anyone who comes through our doors, the Essex Library continues to fulfill its traditional role as a free resource open to all. It's a place to find a quiet corner to read, research a project, explore the collection with a child, or linger among the stacks. Our book clubs, story times, and other programs offer opportunities to learn, be creative, and share ideas. The library as dynamic physical space is central to what we do.

But today's library also extends beyond its walls to encompass online resources and platforms. The powers of technology strengthen our services, broaden our reach, and greatly increase patrons' access to materials, information, cultural programming, and more. The upheavals of the past year have reaffirmed the critical role technology plays in the library's ability to adapt and continue to serve the community.

The strategic plan outlined in these pages attempts to find a balance among these elements: to stay true to our historic mission, reinforce our capacity to meet challenges, and promote vitality into the future.

I'd like to thank our consultant, Patty Dowling, for so skillfully guiding us through this important process.



Kathy Bonomi, President  
Board of Trustees

As Executive Director, it has been my privilege to work with the Board of Trustees and Strategic Planning Committee on the library's new strategic plan.

Begun during the Covid-19 pandemic, the plan is visionary and will be instrumental to our work and engagement over the next few years. The goals and values outlined here will inform our priorities and guide our decisions as we innovate to meet community needs, strengthen our people and systems, and create a more responsive and inclusive space for town residents and users.

While there is no doubt the coronavirus pandemic has required us to be nimble, it has also enabled us to envision where we can grow our services, programs, and community engagement. The staff and I look forward to the work ahead. We are committed to using the plan, and the feedback gathered during our planning process, as both map and inspiration.

If you have any questions about Essex Library Association's strategic plan, please contact me at [dsmith@essexlib.org](mailto:dsmith@essexlib.org) or 860-767-1560. Thank you for your support of and engagement with the library.



Deborah Smith, Executive Director  
Essex Library Association

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## **Introduction**

The Essex Library Association is a vital community institution and has been since 1889. The Library's beginnings were modest – a collection of approximately 500 donated books housed in rented space that was managed by a small group of volunteers. Since that time, the Library has grown to become a modern, professionally staffed organization with a collection of over 40,000 items in a beautiful, 9,500 square foot facility.

Today, the Essex Library Association offers books, media and a wide variety of electronic resources and equipment, two meeting rooms, seventeen computers, and more than 250 programs, lectures and discussions each year. Annually, over 35,000 users are served directly by the Library. Our Interlibrary services extend across the state through our partnerships with the LION consortium and the State Library.

As a membership organization, the Essex Library Association provides free and equal access to library resources for all residents of the town and endeavors to stimulate curiosity, nurture discovery, and inspire individuals of all ages. The Board of Trustees, employees and volunteers in recognition of building a forward-thinking organization that provides programming and resources to respond to emerging community needs, share the Strategic Plan for FY2022/2023 – 2025/2026. Our goal is to ensure continued relevance, sustainability and capacity building.

## **Planning Process**

In 2021, the Board of Trustees of Essex Library Association initiated a process of Strategic Planning. This process utilized a consensus-based approach and relied heavily on data and community input.

All working groups of the board and employees assessed the current strengths and weaknesses of the Library and the threats and opportunities within the community it serves. An online community survey was distributed to gain input and insight. Over 250 respondents provided feedback on the Library. Answers included information on how the Library's history and culture should inform planning, as well as what the library does well and what it could be better. In addition, ten individual interviews and three focus groups were conducted to further inform planning.

The staff of the Library provided an extensive data and research review to the Board on the current environment of the local, state and national arenas. The Board of Trustees and staff completed both an internal and external environmental review to describe the world within which the Library operates. This review included external economic, political, demographic, and nonprofit and community factors that could impact planning, as well as internal Library factors such as programs and services, governance and management, and fundraising and development.

This information provided the board a shared knowledge base for planning. Using the data, the Board of Trustees and Executive Director, participated in a two-day facilitated retreat to set goals for the next three years of the Library. The following content is the output from the planning process.

**The Essex Library Association  
is guided by our values, mission and vision.**

**Values**

**Free and Equal Access**

We believe that the Library serves as a foundation for democracy, civic engagement and responsibility. We believe that free and unfettered access to reliable information empowers all people. We maintain a welcoming presence and endeavor to build community and connections through our service.

**Privacy**

We protect individuals' privacy. We believe that the protection of privacy is essential for intellectual freedom and is fundamental to our work.

**Inclusion**

We acknowledge the depth of lived experience within our community and develop practices that respect all people and their points of view. We recognize and actively affirm the dignity of those we serve, regardless of heritage, education, beliefs, race, income, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation, gender identity and physical or mental capabilities.

**Responsiveness**

We embody an unwavering commitment to serve our community and adapt to its changing needs. We connect people and information, foster imagination and curiosity, support discovery and cultivate the robust exchange of ideas. We listen carefully and attentively to those we serve.

**Integrity**

We are honest and reliable. We practice sound judgment by promoting responsible and transparent governance and ethical action.

**Stewardship**

We are committed to the enduring mission of the Library. We are committed to preserving our past and responding with care and boldness to the future.

## **Mission Statement**

The Essex Library Association is your center for free, reliable information. We stimulate curiosity, nurture creativity and enable discovery. We are a window into the world.

## **Vision**

The Essex Library Association envisions a community where free and equal access to information and ideas preserves and provides the foundation for meaningful connections among people, respectful dialogue and civic engagement.

### **The Essex Library Association Commits to:**

#### **Meet the Needs of Our Community**

*The Board of Trustees recognizes the ongoing and emerging needs of the community it serves and is committed to being responsive and adaptable.*

#### **Leverage Technology**

*The Board of Trustees recognizes the evolving nature of technology and is committed to a values-based and balanced approach to its role and application.*

#### **Ensure Financial Sustainability**

*The Board of Trustees advocates sound fiscal management and resource building to sustain the successful and continued mission of the Library.*

#### **Enhance Governance and Management**

*The Board of Trustees recognizes the excellent people who are currently serving in paid and volunteer roles at The Essex Library Association and intends to maintain that level of professionalism and passion into the future.*

## **Goals and Strategies**

### **FY2022/2023 – 2025/2026**

#### **Goal One:**

The Essex Library Association commits to available, accessible and responsive programming, services and collections to all those we serve.

#### **Strategies**

1. Ensure hours of Library operation respond to community needs;
2. Identify populations and individuals currently underserved by the Library;
3. Assess needs and possible service enhancement for identified populations and individuals;
4. Ensure that active and consistent communications support and expand the reach of the Library;
5. Develop Essex Library centered anecdotal and statistical measures, and user feedback process for each service area to inform planning and resourcing;
6. Conduct space assessment and generate multi-purpose usage and accessibility-based plan for best use of existing indoor and outdoor spaces.



## Goal Two:

The Essex Library Association's technology infrastructure will support the community's free and unfettered access to reliable information and promote effective and equitable delivery of services, programs and collections.

## Strategies

1. Optimize enhancements to the **internal** technology-based resources utilized by the Library;
2. Optimize use of **external** Library technology resources;
3. Generate and implement a Library technology plan that includes short- and long-term approach to technology enhancements and usage.

### Goal Three:

The Essex Library Association commits its financial resources to steward a vital, mission-driven and user-friendly organization.

### Strategies

1. Maintain an effective and comprehensive development program with appropriate resource allocation;
2. Generate a written development plan that strengthens resources and donor relationship building;
3. Evaluate and align resource allocation (people, funding, logistics) throughout Library to support development program;
4. Ensure staff, volunteers, and Friends of the Library have the skills, knowledge, and resources to implement the development plan and support the common goal of sustaining the Library;
5. Generate and implement a property maintenance plan;
6. Ensure a budget for ongoing facility maintenance and long-term capital expenditures;
7. Sustain a healthy mix of funding strategies and sources;
8. Affirm that the current investment policy responds to uncertainty in financial markets and provides for the priorities of the Library.

#### Goal Four:

The Essex Library Association recruits and retains the best employed and volunteer talent to foster the successful implementation of the mission and respond to the needs of the organization in relation to a dynamic and changing environment.

#### Strategies

1. Ensure that the Library board, staff and volunteers remain informed and responsive to diversity and inclusion;
2. Define, adopt and implement policies and procedures that enhance the governance role of the Board of Trustees;
3. Define, adopt and implement personnel policies consistent with library sector best practices;
4. Generate a continuity plan for the Executive Director position;
5. Evaluate and align resource allocation (people, funding, logistics) throughout the Library to support governance and management;
6. Align paid and/or volunteer staffing levels and board responsibilities to respond to emerging needs of the Library including fund development, governance, and community-centered relationship building;
7. Recruit and retain qualified employees by assessing staffing needs, providing adequate compensation, ongoing professional development opportunities, requiring performance that supports the strategic plan and planning for the continuity of operations;
8. Recruit, engage and retain volunteers to meet the needs of the Library.

**Library Board of Trustees  
2020 - 2021**

President: Kathy Bonomi  
Vice President: Betsy Sandberg  
Treasurer: Michael Delouchry  
Secretary: Sandy Cahill

Lisa Burkarth (Friends Representative)  
Rita Christopher  
Michael Hammond  
Jo Kelly  
Peter McAndrew  
Nancy McDonald  
Emily Rapp  
Gary Riggio  
Andrea Schaffner  
Hans Ullstein

**Executive Director**

Deborah Smith

## **History of the Essex Library Association**

Most of the public libraries in Connecticut were started in the late nineteenth century by groups of civic minded individuals. The Essex Library Association, for example, was formed by a small group of private citizens in 1889. Its original collection consisted of approximately five hundred volumes, housed in a few rooms on the second floor of a building in Essex Square where the Talbot's store is currently located.

In 1897 the Essex Library received a bequest from the estate of Captain Joseph Tucker that included a portrait of himself, three paintings of ships he had commanded and \$5,000. The Library still owns the paintings, which are displayed in the 1889 Room and main reading room. The money was used to construct the Library's first permanent home just off the Square at 3 South Main Street, a half-timbered Queen Anne style building that still stands.

By the late 1950's the Library had outgrown this facility. A new structure that was three times the size of the original building was finally erected in 1980 at its present site on West Avenue. Twenty years later, the Library was, once again, experiencing growing pains. A capital campaign was launched and in 2006 the building was expanded to roughly twice its size and completely renovated in 2006.

For the first few decades of its existence the Library was open to members only, who paid \$1.00 per year. In 1924 the Town of Essex began contributing to its support, at which time borrowing privileges were made free for all Essex residents. The Library retained its status as an independent association, however, which could be joined for a minimum contribution of \$2.00 per year. Members were entitled to "...one vote in the affairs of the Association." The minimum contribution required to be considered a "member" of the Association is currently \$35.