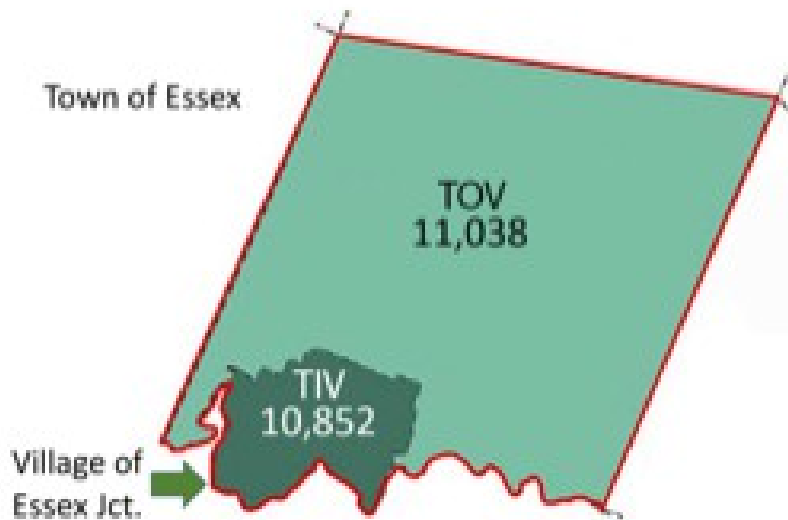


5/13/2021
Testimony on H95

Good morning Madame chair and members of the committee. My name is Betsy Dunn I live in the town of Essex and I am the former state representative for Essex.

I would like to thank you for inviting me to testify on H95 the bill proposing a charter change for the Essex Town Selectboard, which is the governing body for the full town. This issue is of great importance to the residents of the town.

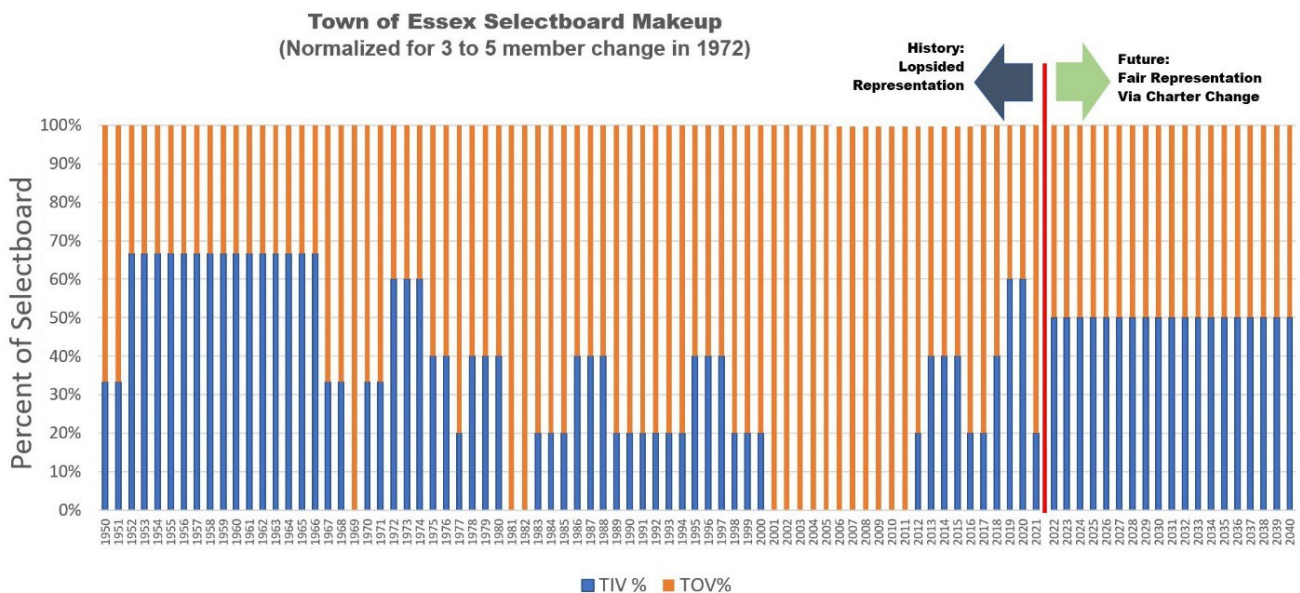
For discussion purposes, when I refer to the Town I include all the residents of the community. At times I will differentiate between residents as to where they live. The TIV – **T**own **I**n the **V**illage, or TOV – **T**own **O**utside of the **V**illage. Our school board uses these same terms. The TOV has been a special tax district over time for: water , highway, and school district.



The TIV as you can see in this map is a very small area geographically, and very densely populated. It is an urban setting. The TOV, on the other hand, is a more suburban, and rural setting having distinctly different needs than the TIV.

The interrelationship of towns and incorporated villages has a long history in Vermont. Over time, the number of incorporated villages has declined, but still some remain. Such is the case with Essex Town, within which sits the incorporated Village of Essex Junction.

Our Selectboard has 5 positions that are currently all “At Large”. Meaning, of course, that membership can be from anywhere in the town. They could all be from the TIV or the TOV . But usually its a mix.



This chart, beginning in the 1950's shows how the composition of the board fluctuates. As you can see, it has always been dominated by one part of the town or the other. Having such a lopsided

representation often results in decisions that are not favorable to approximately half of of the population, no matter which half is in power. And during periods of dominance by one entity policies and major changes can be made with impunity. This would be nullified if 3+3 is passed.

The best example of this type of dominance just happened this past year. The TIV residents on the Selectboard were able to move forward with merger because they held the majority of seats. They never put the question of pursuing a merger with The Village to a vote by the entire Town of Essex, which they always had in the past. Being in the majority meant they didn't have to listen to the very same consulting firm they hired to assess the readiness of the town to merge. Or listen to the other Selectboard members and residents of the town that were engaged with the idea of merger. Compromise was not in the air.

This lopsided membership is exaggerated when the Trustees, who govern the municipality of Essex Junction, and the Selectboard hold joint meetings. At these meetings, the two boards are functioning simultaneously, with separate votes, but they do influence each other. With the “at Large” representation we currently have, hypothetically, it could result in 5 Selectboard members all from the TIV with 5 trustees from the municipality of Essex Junction making all 10 positions from the village. Allowing them to set policies that would favor the Village residents who make up slightly less than half of the town's population.

And as recently as last year, during the negotiations for the merger, 3 members of the Selectboard were from the TIV and 2 from the TOV. Therefore, as Selectboard worked in conjunction with the

trustees on the various aspects of the merger you had 8 members from the Village negotiating with 2 members from the town. This type of representation is so unequal that concerns of the TOV were not listened to. Such negotiations were often described as the village negotiating with the village. This is neither fair or balanced. Currently the makeup of the Selectboard is 4 TOV members and 1 TIV member. This also is not balanced.

In 2019, a citizen petition was circulated to put the question of the Town's representation to a vote, asking for 3 positions for the TIV and 3 for the TOV. The petition was referred to as “ Fair Representation ”. This was put on the 2020 March Town meeting day ballot and was passed by 61.5% of the Town's voters. It subsequently became H 95 the bill we are here to have accepted into the town's charter.

By having equal representation it will, I believe, foster harmony by having each distinct areas of our community equally represented. Not everyone understands that concept however. One former critic has suggested that 3+3 would decrease representation. I disagree. Currently, five people represent 22,000 residents. Our charter change would allow 3 people to represent 11,000 people in each district . The representatives would have better access to their constituents and would align with their cares and concerns. Quality over quantity.

And, to those that say having an even number of members may have votes that result in frequent ties, and that it would be problematic, I disagree again. If a tied vote comes up, and they need a resolution to the issue, they will have to go back to the drawing board, get more testimony on the subject and work out a compromise. I think this is

good democracy in action. Looking for consensus. And as I remember, when the Vermont house and the Vermont Senate convene conference committees the representatives of both both houses are evenly apportioned. In most cases they are 3+3.

In July of 2018, the Trustees, who again govern the municipality of Essex Junction, and the Selectboard made a decision to look into merging our two municipalities. They hired an advertizing and marketing firm known as KSV, which has been known as Kelliher, Samets, and Volk. KSV produced a survey for the residents of the town to fill out , and they held focus groups (also called listening sessions) to determine what are the issues in the Town and what are are highest priorities.

In October, Dave Treston from KSV reported to the joint boards the results of the survey and listening sessions. He did say that the tenor of the discussions indicated that the community as a whole has concerns.

The people were willing to considered a merger for several reasons :

1. It would result in efficiencies,
 2. It eliminate redundancies ,
 3. It could result in the creation of representative wards/districts .
- And the possibility of having a mayor was also discussed

as an aside none of these *reasons that made the merger favorable in the survey* were actually included the recent merger voted on in March.

And, as a matter of fact, when the subcommittee on governance said that districts were not an important issue for the people of the town,

the representative from KSV, David Treston, said no that's incorrect, districts are exactly what the people want!

KSV indicated that representation was a major issue and that a new model should be included in the merger document. There were 3 models of representation offered.

1. All positions “ At Large” what we have now
2. A combination of “At Large” and Districts/or Wards
3. Districts/or wards only

The result of the survey showed 62.44% in favor of all districts/wards representation. Please note that this percentage matches the 61.5 percent of votes for the 3+3 charter change.voted on in March of 2020.

Per KSV, here are the reasons why the district/or ward model was chosen.

1. 81.44% of the people said all parts of Essex would be more fairly represented by districts
2. 65.53% said They believed that issues pertaining to “my” specific part of Essex would be better addressed. And
3. 57.39% said they believed it would bring diverse perspectives to serve all of Essex.

The all “At Large” option was disliked due to concerns that issues in “my” part of town would be minimized or ignored, which is what happens right now.

KSV also highlighted the predominant sentiment of distrust towards both boards and the conviction that the composition of the boards typically leads to resolutions that are more favorable to the Village .

In conclusion, I believe that the people of the Town of Essex have repeatedly said that districts are what they want. And have been saying this for years. Also the vote on 3+3 pertained only to the Municipality of the Town, which as I have shown includes the people in TIV and the TOV. Some individuals expressed a concern that the people in the Municipality of the Village did not get to vote on the 3+3. this is correct. This was not a vote on the Village governance only the Town's. And the TIV did have a vote.

I urge this committee to agree with the voice of the people and allow this charter change to pass through the committee and be entertained by the full house for a vote. And hopefully move onto the Senate for a vote so that we, The Town, may start the process of change.

Thank You