

Good morning, Madame Chair and committee members.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you this morning.

My name is Irene Wrenner, and I have lived in Essex for 24 years.

I served for 12 years on the Town Selectboard, and was elected to be its vice chair and chair along the way.

I'm now in my 16th year of working on sensible solutions to problems that have plagued Essex since before I was born, namely unfair taxation and lopsided representation. Today, I'll speak to the latter.

As a former middle and high school athlete, nothing is more important to me than playing by the rules and having a level playing field.

Ken Signorello and I played by the rules to gather 1,083 signatures to put this charter change on the March 2020 ballot. We had spent months knocking on doors, talking to residents inside and outside the Village, to ensure our idea met their needs before the vote.

[Opponents of "3+3" have claimed that people didn't know what they were voting for. But my experience is that people only vote YES on something they do understand and agree with. If someone didn't understand the level playing field that "3+3" offered, they would not vote for it. I don't believe our charter change was passed by confused voters. Voters can read. Voters can ask questions. They can vote NO or skip an article they don't understand. The large majority of voters did understand and approved of having fair and equal representation.]

In addition to knocking on hundreds and hundreds of doors, Ken and I hung out at the entrance to the big annual craft fair in early November, and one of us was at each polling place in March all day long, to answer voters' questions.

The "3+3" charter change is all about leveling the playing field so that the sport we call politics will be played fairly, and so that our local government might equally benefit all of our citizens.

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What is the one thing you know about Essex?

Our reputation is one of strife.  
We're always fighting...

Over Merger, as if its passage is necessary in order for us to function.

Over Merger, as if it WILL pass eventually, if we just vote on it one more time.  
That was the sentiment in March.  
And voters said NO.

But hearing the voices of nearly 7,500 people wasn't enough for some merger proponents. They petitioned for a re-vote. And all of those people had to vote again.

A number of Village residents encouraged neighbors to use their one last chance to approve merger -- in April -- or else the Village might decide to Separate.

To incentivize a positive outcome on merger, another petition put a non-binding vote -- on the Village ballot only -- to create a charter to Separate from the Town, if merger didn't pass.

Imagine the pickle that put reluctant voters in: Marry Me or I'm Leaving Forever!

...Does that sound like a healthy relationship to you?

It's not. In April, 8,425 voters weighed in and the margin of NO voters increased.

As Town Meeting Television's Election Night anchor put it, upon seeing the even split on our Selectboard 3-year seat and merger votes in March: "That's one seriously divided community," before he and his co-host joked about what to do in Essex. They wound up laughing it off.

<https://www.facebook.com/103915954289919/videos/201646088175406>

Actually, it's no laughing matter. Essex has been a seriously divided community since IBM moved in, in 1957.

The first merger vote was conducted, and it failed, a year later.

The promise and perils of merger have continued ever since.  
And it's always about money: Who gets to keep more or spend more.

Sides are taken, lines are drawn, and after each vote a small sigh of relief.

The animosity continues, however, usually as an undercurrent. Then it rises to a crescendo the next time someone gets the idea that THEY have found the secret and amassed enough political power to get Merger done.

Or to get Separation done.

Or Both. Like in 1999.

2021 is no different.

The Village has had a majority on the SB in recent years so they had the power, they thought, to make Merger happen.

Rather than continue this unhealthy pattern of interaction, I wondered: Isn't there a better way?

As with many vexing problems, the answer was right in front of our faces.

You see, our nearby school districts merged back in 2017.

Their merger plan assured voters that, whether you live in the original Town School District or Village School District, you'd be represented on the merged board by district in equal numbers.

The populations of both districts are equivalent. Therefore, a total of 4 Village and 4 Town reps (who live outside the Village) are elected.

We refer to this model as "4+4".

And, as unconventional as that may sound, those 8 district reps continue to reflect the unique values of the constituents in different parts of town.

As an aside, the town of Westford also has representation on that board, two people, who each get a half vote. Therefore, an even number of votes (10!) is cast on every issue. A tie or two -- 4.5 votes to 4.5 votes -- has occurred over time, so it's been a terrific test case, right in our own town, as to how "3+3" can work for our municipality.

Although our town hasn't merged, we do have a number of functions that are shared by our inside and outside the Village residents. They are paid for by everyone, yet not everyone has a representative at the table, as Betsy described earlier.

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The "3+3" Charter change will correct 2 long-standing problems with governance.

- 1) At-large representation, and
- 2) An uneven number of seats (5).

1) Let's talk first about at-large representation. My comments are based on what I learned from an expert on the matter, George Pillsbury, Founder and Senior Policy Advisor for Nonprofit VOTE. ([Nonprofit VOTE](#) partners with America's nonprofits to help the people they serve participate and vote. They

are the largest source of nonpartisan resources for nonprofits to integrate voter engagement into their ongoing activities and services and the manager of National Voter Registration Day.)

“If you want to rig a local election, there’s an easier way than stuffing a ballot box, gerrymandering a district, or amassing a campaign war chest to scare off challengers.”

Just adopt winner-take-all “At-Large” voting, instead of using districts, so that all candidates must run “at large” townwide.

At-Large voting has been called “the oldest trick in the book”. With good reason. In 1788 the first of the United States elected their members of Congress At-Large, statewide.

Most soon saw how this left significant regions without local reps, and so they began using regional-based districts to reflect the diversity of their populations.



Since then, Congress has [banned At-Large voting](#) for all federal elections. And it’s been discarded by most states. In fact, it’s been subject to more litigation for its discriminatory impact than any other voting method.

Still, At-Large voting persists in hundreds of local jurisdictions, as it has for centuries.

After the Civil War, Southern cities adopted At-Large elections to ensure white-only governments. Northern cities did the same to advantage ethnic groups or parties, such as Lowell, Massachusetts, in the 1950s.

At-large representation can work for small, homogeneous communities. I'm sure it's fine for rural towns like Ripton, Guildhall, or Craftsbury.

But Essex is neither small nor homogeneous. Other diverse communities, such as Montpelier and Burlington, use ward-based (or district) representation instead, to ensure that different populations have appropriate input at the board table.

At-large (townwide) representation has not worked in Essex, given our two-pronged history, geography, culture, and settlement patterns.

Our 39-square mile town contains urban, suburban and rural areas in each section, to be clear. But most of the urban zoning is in the Village and the bulk of the rural territory is outside of it.

People living in each district have very different needs. It is time we afford them a means of representation that honors their district's uniqueness. District Rep!

2) Let's talk about how an uneven number of seats has failed Essex as well.

As I often say, "Watching SB meetings is like sitting through repeated hockey games in which one team always has a power play, and the other team never gets the puck!"

In other words, whichever half of town controls the majority of seats, also controls the agenda for the entire town.

Most recently, the Village controlled the majority of seats on our townwide Selectboard. Their agenda was to spend tens of thousands of dollars on a merger plan that the majority didn't want -- and still doesn't.

Three years' staff time was wasted working on a plan that today is as DOA as when they first began. The half of the town that wanted to talk about a different future was not just outnumbered at the SB table, they were silenced when they asked for representatives who could speak on their behalf.

Whatever the future brings, it's time for Essex to honor the different voices in its TIV and TOV by providing "3+3" representation on its SB -- just like the EWSD School Board did with its "4+4" representation for Essex in 2017.

Thank you~