

Essex looks to restore past glory to it's waterfront

Written by Administrator

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ESSEX | In the 1980s, the Essex waterfront was a happening place, as throngs of people came both by land and by sea to dock their boats, dip their toes in the water and enjoy a meal or a drink on the scenic shores of Lake Champlain.

But today, time and events have taken their toll on three prime lakefront properties. The Essex Marina is up for sale, the Halloween storm of 2019 buckled concrete piers at the Essex Shipyard and it has been closed for a year, and a venerable lakefront restaurant has been torn down.

Still, there are some assets in place, including the popular Chez Lin and Ray's restaurant perched between the water and Main Street, a rich history and, of course, Lake Champlain itself. Now, Essex is looking to parley these strengths into something more.

"This was once the hotspot of the whole area," said Essex Supervisor Ken Hughes, who thinks the time might be right to restore the waterfront to its past glories.

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As such, with the support of the Essex County Industrial Development Agency, the Town of Essex has obtained a \$10,000 grant from the Lake Champlain-Lake George Regional Planning Board to investigate the feasibility, and determine public interest in purchasing and developing the properties into a destination for residents and vacationers.

Hughes said any plan for development would have to be paid for with state and federal grants, not local tax money. And while town ownership would take the properties off of the tax rolls, Hughes said that revenue could be made up with leases and sales taxes generated by greater commercial activity.

“There are some really amazing opportunities,” Hughes said. “This is one of the crown jewels of the town, and it’s an opportunity to marry Main Street to the Lake.”

Many New York lakeside communities have looked to Vermont, which has seemed to have had better success at developing their waterfronts, and wondered what the formula for success might be. With its history, architecture, trails and overall charm, Hughes said Essex could become an immediate destination — if only it had public access to the shoreline.

The feasibility study “is a plan for a plan,” Hughes said, and will be based largely on what residents want. “We want to hear what the options are, and we want lots of community input,” he said. “This is transitional land, and it would benefit the people of Essex directly.”

In the 19th century, Essex seemed destined for maritime stardom. A busy shipbuilding town, it built bateaux and schooners, including the “General Butler” schooner that, like its namesake, was more celebrated after its demise than in its heyday. Today it rests at the bottom of the lake near Burlington where divers can amuse themselves by seeing the jerry rigged steering mechanism that caused it to hit the breakwater and go down.

Products of animal, mineral and vegetable were all shipped out of Essex, and the Essex Horse Nail Co. thrived on the ground that’s now Beggs Park before it burned in 1918.

Hughes said these and many other historical nuggets add to the area’s appeal. “Tons of

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shipbuilding took place; that's what brought so many people to the area."

The Essex Marina once encompassed much of the protected, crescent shoreline south of Beggs Park. But it was divided into three properties in 1987, and while that worked for a while, it was unable to maintain its old appeal. Hughes said the town has had conversations with the current landowners, who are willing to listen to town proposals.

"For over 200 years, Essex residents have known the value of our waterfront on Lake Champlain," the town wrote in a message to town residents. "We know that a thriving waterfront equates to job opportunities, greater tourism, and a stronger economy for Essex. Today, we have the opportunity to capitalize on a unique opportunity: purchase the properties that house the marinas and restaurant, merge them back together and revitalize this area as the must-visit destination on Lake Champlain."