



Town of Essex

**OFFICIAL
PLAN**

Your Community. Your Vision.

Colchester Secondary Plan Recommended Policy Changes

May 2026



Table of Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Existing Conditions and Draft Secondary Plan	6
3	What We Heard.....	10
4	Additional Analysis and Revised Recommendations.....	18

1 INTRODUCTION

WSP is supporting the Town of Essex in preparing a new Official Plan (“OP”) for the Town to replace its current and in-effect OP, which was last updated in 2013. A component of the work for this assignment is the update of the Colchester Hamlet Guideline Plan (“Guideline Plan”). The Guideline Plan, which is currently in effect, was enacted by Town Council in 2007 to guide growth and development in the Colchester Hamlet, which is at the heart of the Town’s agricultural area, and specifically within the largest cluster of vineyards, wineries, and fruit orchards in Essex County. The Guideline Plan outlined an ambitious vision for the evolution of Colchester into a mixed-use community with new English Tudor-style buildings flanking County Road 50 through the centre of the Hamlet.

“Hamlet”

Note that the County of Essex has a new, specific definition for “Hamlet” in its Official Plan, and only identifies Gesto as a Hamlet in the Town, but to be consistent with historical terminology, Colchester will be referred to as the “Hamlet” periodically throughout this report.



Figure 1: Location of Colchester in the Town of Essex (WSP)

This vision has not been realized to date, and an update to the Guideline Plan, to be renamed the Colchester Secondary Plan (“CSP”), was necessary to provide clarity to the community and interested proponents of development in Colchester.

Thus, this is not a brand new Secondary Plan, but a rethinking of the existing plan enacted in 2007, and many of the policies in the draft CSP are currently in-effect.

The initial draft of the CSP was completed and presented to the public along with the draft new OP in late Summer 2024. Based on significant community feedback on the drafts, Essex Town Council paused any further statutory consideration and directed Town staff to work with WSP to perform additional analysis and community engagement. This “back to the drawing board” work has been completed and this report summarizes the resulting recommendations for the draft CSP.

- > The findings of additional community consultation and recommendations in this report will be presented to Town Council in February 2026 for information and discussion. In response to Council direction, WSP and Town staff will proceed to preparing the Final Draft Colchester Secondary Plan to bring to the public and Council along with the Final Draft Official Plan for the Town.

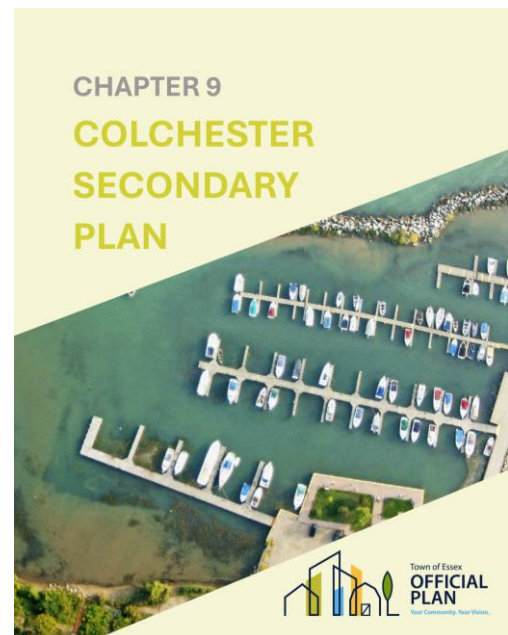


Figure 2: Cover page from 2024 draft Colchester Secondary Plan (WSP)

2 EXISTING CONDITIONS AND DRAFT SECONDARY PLAN

Colchester is a small settlement area in the south of the Town, on the north shore of Lake Erie. In addition to its proximity to the Town’s wine and tender fruit industries, it has Colchester Beach and Harbour, a popular summer destination for residents and visitors, and one of the Town’s (and broader County’s) few access points to Lake Erie. Colchester is predominantly a residential community, with several commercial uses, including restaurants and the new Grove Motel.



Source: Tourism Windsor-Essex Pelee Island

The update of the CSP in 2024 was based on several key factors related to the unique nature of Colchester.

- > Colchester is identified as a Secondary Settlement Area by the County of Essex and is not intended for major growth or clustering of services and amenities. There is not a feasible path through which Colchester can grow into a service centre like Harrow or Essex Centre, with clustering of daily services like grocery stores and banks.
- > Previous planning work in Colchester and earlier consultation on this project made clear that there is a desire for Colchester as complete a community as possible, with better amenities for daily life. Attracting more businesses and amenities is difficult to achieve without a substantial increase in the residential population of the Hamlet - with the limitation on significant growth in Colchester as a Secondary Settlement Area, this increase is not possible, nor is it desired by the community. Thus, bridging these two needs is a difficult planning problem, requiring as flexible land use permissions as possible within the existing Colchester context.



Source: Garfield's Colchester



Source: Tripadvisor

Figure 3: Colchester has several restaurants serving the community, including Colchester Bar and Grill (top), Garfield's (middle) and The Wreck (bottom).

- > Access to the Lake Erie waterfront was a significant driver in certain policies in the initial draft CSP. As one of the only public access points to the lake in the Town, Colchester Beach and Harbour (and by extension, Jackson Street) become a bottleneck for visitors and residents in the summer months. Policies and mapping round mobility, public realm, and views and vistas in the initial draft CSP were all intended to ease this congestion.
- > The CSP and broader Town Official Plan are fundamentally land use planning documents. They can guide and to infrastructure and transportation planning to some extent, but can only support or not inhibit tourism and economic development. Furthermore, the CSP cannot force any landowner in Colchester to redevelop their land – the Hamlet will only develop insomuch as landowners wish it to.



Figure 5: Colchester Harbour, also showing waterfront properties on Sullivan Street in the centre of the frame (Source: Town of Essex)

3 WHAT WE HEARD

Public engagement for the CSP has been undertaken by the Town and WSP in several ways:

- > An initial focus group was formed Spring 2023 to meet virtually and inform policy directions for the initial draft CSP. It should be noted that while the Town issued an open call for the focus group, uptake was low and the focus group on this occasion was relatively small.
- > In late Summer 2024, the Town held a series of public open houses on the draft new OP and CSP, including a dedicated open house in Colchester. These open houses occurred shortly after a public meeting held by the developer of the Colchester Bay lands to present its proposal, which galvanized significant opposition and attendance at the open houses. The Town received over 100 written comment responses on the draft CSP, although many comments were related to the proposed Colchester Bay development rather than the CSP itself.
- > Based on Council direction, Town staff and WSP devised a work plan for a Phase 2 of the Official Plan project, to address issues raised by the community in the public consultation process, including on the initial draft CSP. This work plan, as well as a summary of the issues raised, was presented at a public meeting in May 2025, and Town staff and WSP collected feedback and answered questions.

Many comments from the public are related to issues that are outside the scope of the CSP, or even the Town's Official Plan. For example, concerns around traffic issues in the Town that may arise from residential growth are out of the hands of Town staff and WSP, who cannot control growth in the Town. Nevertheless, wherever concerns can be addressed through the CSP or Official Plan, every effort will be made to do so.

- > In Phase 2 of the Official Plan project, a new focus group was created based on a second open call for applications issued by the Town in Summer 2025. In this case, interest was high, and the Town and WSP were able to select a group of 10 people to participate.
- > This group represented a cross-section of Colchester residents across a range of demographics and perspectives, as well as one non-resident of the Town representing environmental advocacy in the Town and broader Windsor-Essex region. An in-person meeting was held for this focus group at the Colchester Community Centre in September 2025.
- > The meeting was two hours and included an initial kick-off discussion to establish critical values and what made Colchester special, followed by a presentation from WSP on the rationale for the initial draft CSP, and a guided discussion of where the vision, guiding principles, and policies of the CSP could be updated.

As noted above, the project team at the Town and WSP have collected significant feedback from the public on the initial draft CSP through several engagement activities. Key themes of this feedback are summarized below.



Figure 6: The 2024 Colchester Bay concept proposed for the lands at County Road 50 and Dunn Road had significant high-density development, which caused significant community concern over fit with the existing character of the Hamlet. (Source: Horizon Investments)

Development Scale, Density & Community Character

Throughout the engagement process, residents have generally opposed high-density development in Colchester, fearing it will transform the hamlet into a busy, tourist-oriented area rather than the quiet rural community they value.

Concerns raised:

- > Desire to avoid becoming “another Grand Bend.”
- > Fear that the proposed density will erode Colchester’s small-town character.
- > Requests for slow, managed growth oriented to long-term residents.



Figure 7: Colchester South Wastewater Treatment Facility (Source: Google Earth)

Infrastructure, Servicing & Costs

Residents voiced concerns about the ability of existing services to support growth.

Concerns raised:

- > Insufficient roads, hydro service, sewage capacity, and drainage systems.
- > Frequent power outages and known flooding areas (e.g., Belcreef Beach).
- > Concern that infrastructure upgrades could place costs on existing residents.
- > Requests for clear assurances that developers pay for upgrades (parks, roads, lighting, sewers, etc.).

Environmental, Agricultural & Natural Heritage Protection

There is strong emphasis on safeguarding natural and agricultural assets.

Concerns raised:

- > Loss of prime farmland to development.
- > Impact on woodlots, wildlife corridors, watercourses, and Lake Erie ecology.
- > Importance of the Essex Region Natural Heritage Study in shaping policy.
- > Desire to protect vistas, natural cover, bird migration pathways, and bluff viewpoints.
- > Concerns about climate impacts, traffic emissions, and overall sustainability.

Tourism, Commercial Uses & Community Priorities

Residents expressed mixed views on tourism, emphasizing that local needs should come first.

Concerns raised:

- > Distinction between agri-tourism and winery tourism, and beach tourism.
- > Concerns about noise, parking pressure, and seasonal crowds.
- > Opposition to commercial rezoning on Sullivan Street, especially waterfront commercial uses within residential areas.
- > Recognition that attractions bring cars and traffic impacts must be addressed.



Figure 8: North 42 Vineyard (Source: Tourism Essex)

Housing, Density & Affordability

Questions on housing focused on what types will be permitted.

Concerns raised:

- > Skepticism that new development will be affordable for local families.
- > Requests for more single-family homes rather than condos or multi-unit buildings.
- > Interest in clarity on potential densities in units per hectare, ADU permissions, and servicing limits.
- > Concerns about short-term rentals and absentee ownership affecting neighbourhood stability.

Traffic, Parking, Accessibility & Public Realm

Residents solutions that balance locals and visitors.

Concerns raised:

- > Parking congestion near Colchester Beach and Harbour.
- > Need for improved lakefront access that respects private property.
- > Calls for traffic calming, streetscaping, and potentially a bypass on County Road 50.
- > Interest in better amenities: sidewalks, lighting, safety improvements, and accessibility upgrades.

Public Land, Schools & Community Services

Additional community needs were identified.

Concerns raised:

- > Concerns over school capacity with population growth.
- > Interest in community facilities (daycare, year-round indoor amenities).
- > Ideas for using the Colchester School House for community purposes.



Figure 9: Colchester Community Centre (Source: Town of Essex)

Overall Themes

Overall, the community feedback indicated a desire to focus the CSP on a vision of Colchester as a complete community for residents first, rather than a tourism-driven destination, planning for the following:

- > Protecting natural heritage and agriculture
- > Slow growth
- > Scenic views and rural character
- > Year-round livability for residents
- > Balanced tourism
- > Developer-funded infrastructure

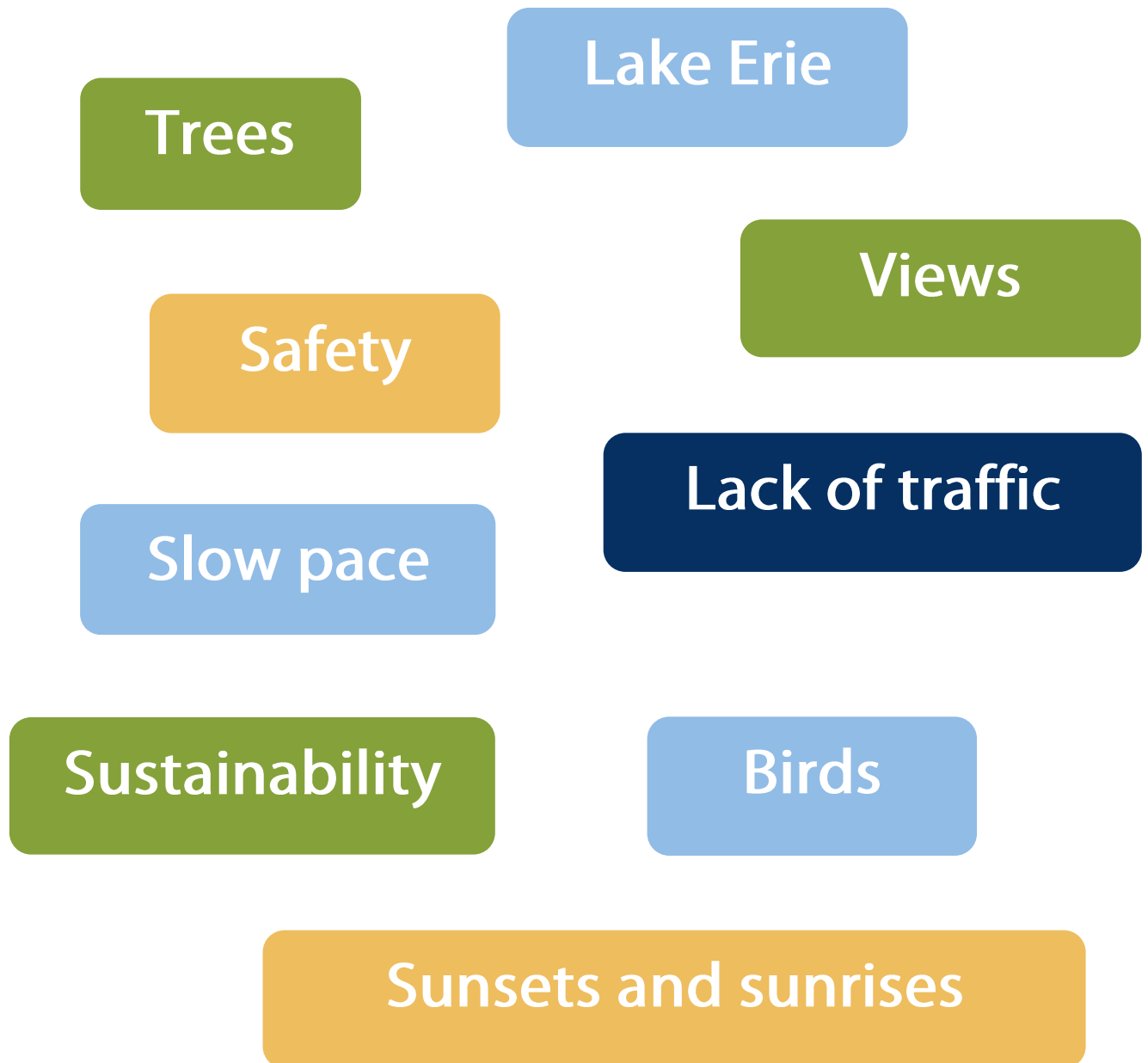


Figure 10: A selection of things that make Colchester special, as brainstormed by the focus group in September 2025

4 ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS AND REVISED RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the community feedback collected on the draft Colchester Secondary Plan and through the focus group, and combining with additional planning analysis, the following sections contain recommendations for updates to the draft Colchester Secondary Plan.

Overall Topics

As part of this rethink of the CSP, it is important to return to the question of “why have a Secondary Plan” and make sure that the policies of the updated CSP clearly answer this question.

With the removal of the English Tudor vision for Colchester, and the recognition that the County of Essex and the Town do not intend the Hamlet to be centre of growth or major development, the primary purpose of the CSP can be broken down into the following components:

- > The CSP can provide guidance for the remaining vacant lands in Colchester, to make sure that their development fits the broader goals and objectives of the Town’s Official Plan and the needs of the community.
- > The CSP can also guide the intensification and redevelopment of lands in the Hamlet which are already built-on, but which could evolve into more diverse uses.
- > The CSP can set up a policy environment for future improvements to Colchester, by the Town and/or through development, like more sidewalks, safer crossings of County Road 50 for pedestrians,
- > Primarily, through the CSP the Town can proactively plan for increased development interest, guide it, and leverage it to improve amenities and daily life for residents. Should this development interest not be significant, the Hamlet can continue to function as status-quo, but if significant interest materializes, the Town can have a clear vision to reference for interested developers, rather than reacting to development proposals in an ad hoc manner.

Vision and Guiding Principles

The draft CSP included a vision statement for Colchester in 25 years, which is included here.

“The vision for the Colchester Secondary Plan is to achieve a beautiful, lively, and connected community with a mix of uses that support residential life and the Town of Essex’s fast-growing tourism industry.

Growth will be encouraged through incremental intensification, primarily by redevelopment of underutilized lots and new infill development, and mixed-use developments that activate Colchester’s Main Streets are preferred. Over time, the Secondary Plan Area will transition from a primarily low-density residential community with several disparate and spread-out commercial uses to one with vibrant mixed-use areas and clear gateways, vistas, and views.

The two primary corridors of the Secondary Plan Area will be County Road 50/Murdoch Street and Jackson Street, along which redevelopment and intensification will be focused, especially those uses supporting agri-tourism activities related to the wine and viticulture industry. A variety of commercial uses such restaurants, cafes, lodging, microbreweries, stores showcasing local food and beverages, artisans, and crafts will animate the Main Street Area along County Road 50/Murdoch Street and Jackson Street.”

In addition to the Main Street Area along the two Corridors, the Colchester Cultural Character Area will be a destination for visitors and includes a community and tourism hub centred around the Colchester Schoolhouse.”

Based on feedback from the public, particularly through the focus group, we recommend that the Vision statement be condensed and amended to refocus the CSP on how Colchester will primarily evolve as a permanent community, and that its place in the Town's tourism landscape is secondary. The Vision should hone in on what makes Colchester special for those who live there.

A proposed revised Vision statement is below.

"The vision for the Colchester Secondary Plan is to build on what makes Colchester special to support a sustainable year-round community that is connected to nature and Lake Erie through active living, and includes a variety of pedestrian-friendly land uses and buildings that maintain Colchester's small town feel and the needs of its residents.

Over time, through managed growth, Colchester will evolve from a primarily residential community to a complete community with a mix of uses that serve residents and visitors alike. The primary corridor within Colchester for redevelopment and intensification will be the Main Street Area along County Road 50 (Murdoch Street). A variety of commercial uses such as restaurants, lodgings, cafes, and retail stores for showcasing local food, beverages, and artisan products, will animate the area.

The Colchester Secondary Plan will guide growth and development in the Hamlet to ensure Colchester remains connected to its past while remaining inclusive to the needs of present and future residents and visitors."

Like the Vision, the CSP's Guiding Principles require a change in approach to refocus on Colchester as a year-round place where people live. The following are recommended as revised Guiding Principles:

- > **Maintain and build on what makes Colchester special**
- > **Support the animation of the Hamlet with a mix of uses**
- > **Achieve a high-quality, safe, and beautiful public realm**
- > **Protect and enhance the shoreline and environment**
- > **Support the agri-tourism and recreational tourism industries**

Land Use

The land policies of the CSP should build on the revamped Vision and Guiding Principles by refocusing on how Colchester should operate as a community first. The overall thrust of land use and development permissions in the revised draft CSP should build on what makes Colchester special now. This includes the following changes:

- > Clarify land use designations around the foot of Jackson Street and the waterfront by redesignating Colchester Park, Beach, and Harbour lands to Parks and Open Space.
- > Change proposed land use of privately-owned lands on Sullivan Street from Waterfront Commercial to Residential, removing commercial use permissions from those lands which were contemplated in the initial draft CSP. This responds to community concerns about the potential impacts on traffic, parking, and safety from introducing commercial uses on Sullivan Street, which has a narrow right-of-way.

- > Retain existing Main Street Area designation along County Road 50 and Jackson Street to guide new commercial development to the Hamlet’s main thoroughfare.
- > Remove the Colchester Mixed-Use designation from the Colchester Bay lands and maintain the Residential designation. It will be important to keep the direction from the Colchester Mixed-Use designation around the need to connect to the broader Hamlet, particularly through the extension of the existing street grid into the Colchester Bay lands. Policy direction for these lands will also be to build on the character of the existing residential areas while balancing realistic market needs and the need for a variety of housing options and sizes. Additional direction on built form and urban design can be included specifically for this site, particularly for limiting overall residential density of the lands to what is feasible within existing sanitary servicing capacity.
- > Continue to permit home occupations everywhere in the Residential areas of the Hamlet, and in addition, allow for some low-impact home industries, such as small arts and crafts studios, custom workshops, and small-scale commercial enterprises on suitable sites, provided that the character of the Hamlet and the interests of neighbouring residents are respected. These permissions could be implemented in more detail through zoning.

Accessory Commercial Units

There is an opportunity for the Town to explore an emerging planning concept called an Accessory Commercial Unit (“ACU”). ACUs are accessory buildings or portions of dwellings which are used for commercial uses (e.g., small cafes or artisan shops). The principal use of the property where an ACU is located remains residential, and the ACU can be limited in various ways (e.g., setting a maximum gross floor area) through the Town’s zoning by-law. ACUs could support the gentle development of new retail or service commercial uses in Colchester where there may not be a customer base to justify the full development of a standalone commercial use.

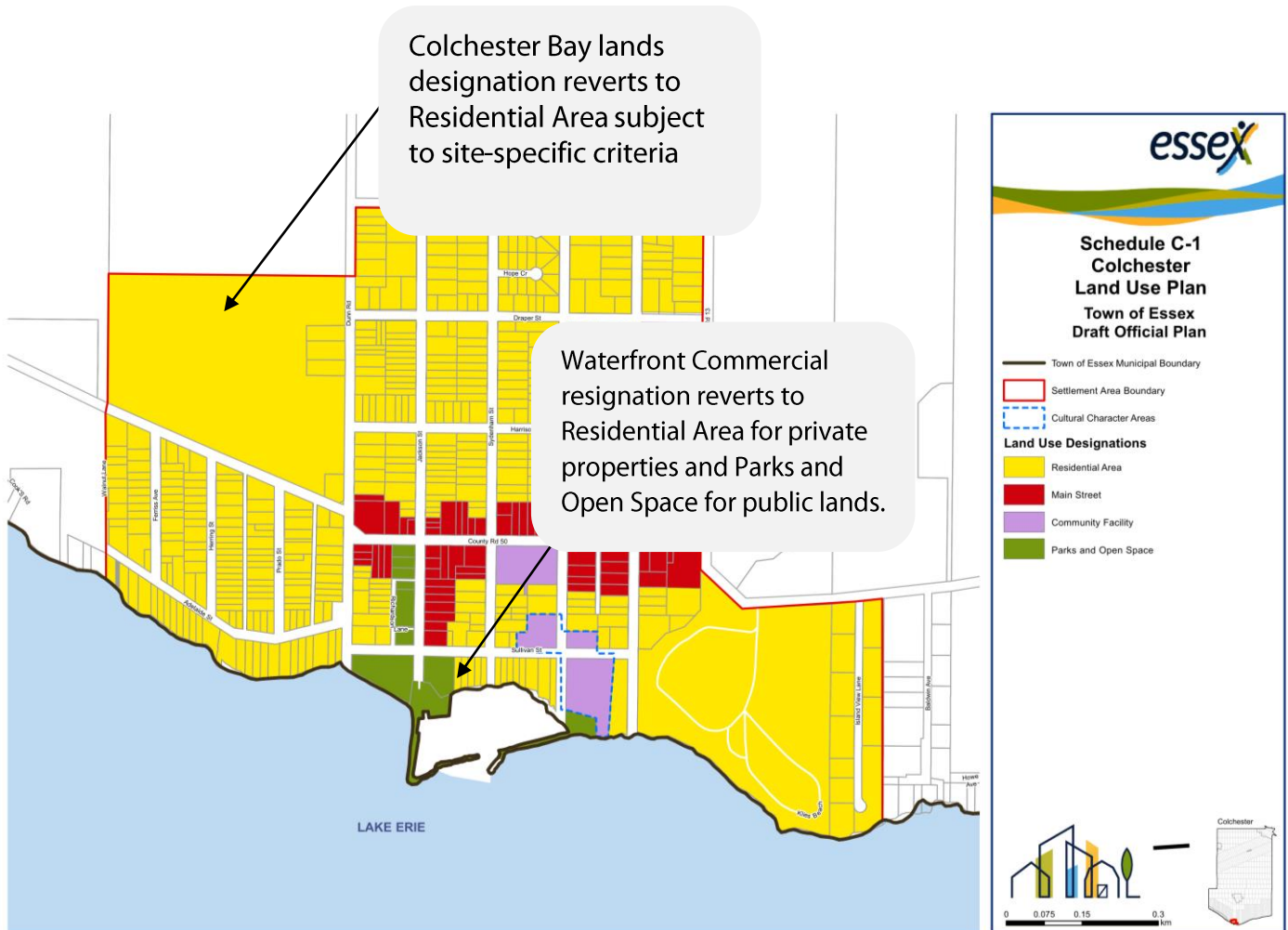


Figure 11: Proposed revisions to the Colchester Land Use Plan (WSP)

Built Form

As noted above, a focus of this update to the CSP is to shift from the vision of the original Guideline Plan to a more grounded, realistic scenario that will serve the existing and future community of Colchester residents. Built form (i.e., the buildings in the Hamlet, both public and private), is an important component in shaping the character of Colchester, which has been reinforced by feedback from the community. The initial draft Colchester Secondary Plan tried to balance maintaining this character with support for reasonable building heights and massing in the parts of Colchester that are envisioned for development, including the Main Street areas and the Colchester Bay lands.

After further community consultation, the following recommendations are made for changes to the next draft CSP:

- > Retain existing development permissions in the Main Street area for a variety of mixed-use development, particularly for residential uses over ground-floor commercial uses, but lower maximum building height to three storeys. This change reflects the need for compatibility between any new buildings on County Road 50 or Jackson Street and existing neighbouring buildings, many of which are single-storey houses.
- > Focus the language of the CSP on infill development that **fits** Colchester while supporting the Vision and Guiding Principles. While under Ontario planning law the Town cannot require that buildings look a certain way, the CSP can provide urban design guidance and aspirational policies for maintaining the Hamlet's character in new buildings. These policies, which were included in the initial draft CSP, can be elaborated on in the final draft CSP.
- > Include new policies in the final draft CSP to encourage pre-zoning of lands in the Main Street designation, allowing for any interested landowners in those areas to proceed to redevelopment more easily and sooner.
- > As noted above, include built form and urban design policies to guide the redevelopment of the large parcel of land at Dunn Road and County Road 50, including direction to be implemented in a draft plan of subdivision.

Public Realm and Mobility

The initial draft CSP included policies and mapping which laid out a planned public realm network in the Hamlet. This included a mobility network that focused on the pedestrian circulation of people in a loop manner between the Main Street area on County Road 50, the beach, and the future cultural hub at the Colchester Schoolhouse, via Bagot, Sullivan, and Jackson Streets. It also identified potential new connections to the waterfront, including a potential trail link between an extension of Bagot Street south of Sullivan Street to the Colchester Harbour and Beach.

The following recommendations are made for changes to the public realm and mobility policies of the CSP:

- > On further consultation and receiving feedback from landowners on Sullivan Street, our team gained clarity on the extent of riparian rights for those landowners with waterfront properties, and that the proposed future waterfront trail connection is not feasible. Policies and mapping referring to or showing this trail will be removed, and a policy will be included in the final CSP noting these riparian rights.
- > Based on community concerns raised around the preservation of vegetation and trees in Colchester, policies on views and vistas should be updated to specifically reference the need to consider natural heritage impacts from any additional connections to the water, even on public lands. It will be made clear that improving public space in the Hamlet should not come at the expense of any natural heritage features, but work with the features.



Figure 12: View of Colchester Harbour, showing properties on Sullivan Street with waterfront access and riparian rights. Lack of publicly-owned land along the waterfront in this area makes the future trail connection to the foot of Bagot Street non-feasible.

- > Re-think policies and mapping for complete streets in the CSP. The “loop” concept referenced above relies on significant infrastructural upgrades to Sullivan and Bagot Streets to achieve a complete street outcome, which are not currently physically or fiscally feasible for the Town. Instead, the focus for complete streets and active transportation connections should be focused on County Road 50 and Jackson Street. This will include policy direction for the separation of cycling facilities and sidewalks as the Main Street areas develop.
- > Retain focus on road safety that was included in the initial draft CSP. The need for safe pedestrian crossings of County Road 50 will continue to be articulated, and draft Schedule C-2 can be updated to identify potential intersection improvements, including signalization or crosswalks. This policy direction can be integrated with policies and mapping for future Gateways.
- > As noted above, specific policies should be included to require that any plan of subdivision for the lands at Dunn Road and County Road 50 have as many connections as possible to the existing street grid in Colchester.

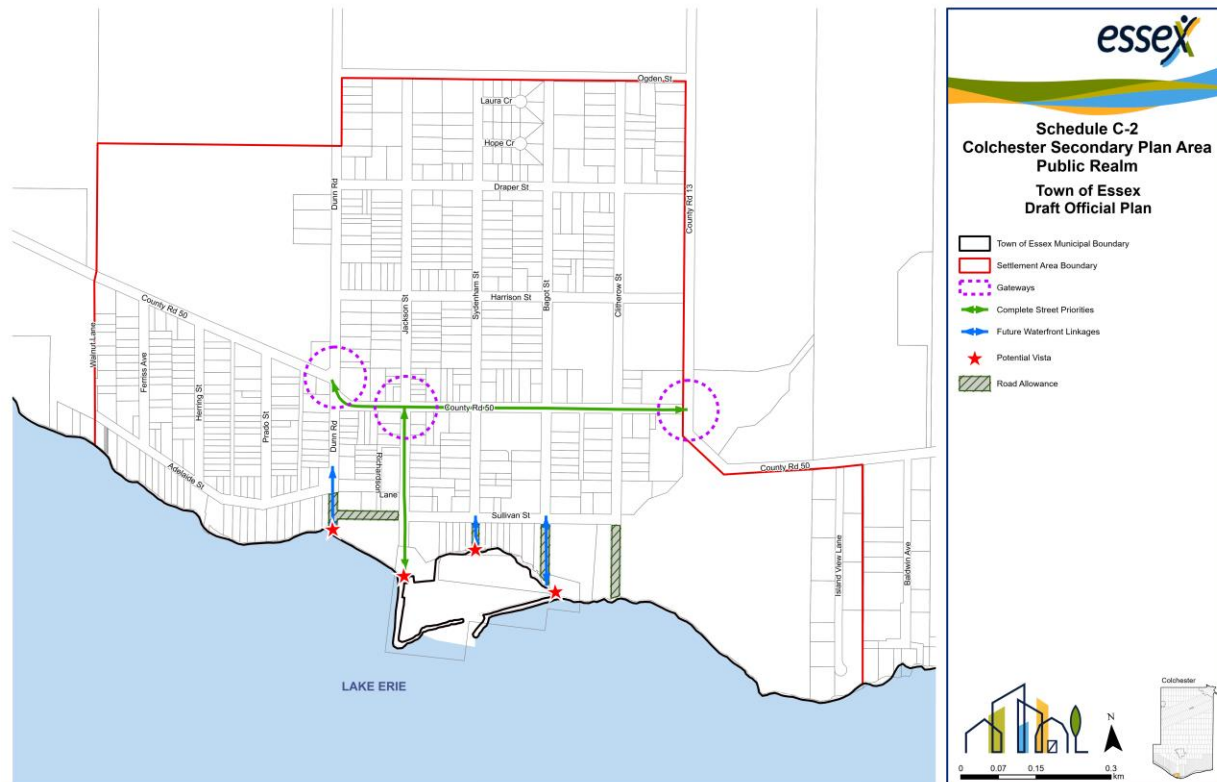


Figure 13: Proposed revisions to the Colchester Public Realm map.

Tourism

As discussed in the re-thinking of the Vision and Guiding Principles for the CSP, community feedback on the initial draft CSP made it clear that the needs of residents should not be outweighed by the needs of tourism. Nevertheless, residents did acknowledge the place of Colchester in the Town’s and County’s agricultural and recreational tourism industries. Regarding tourism, two key points resonated with the project team from community feedback: that tourism driven by Colchester Beach and other recreational opportunities is different from tourism driven by the wine industry and other agritourism; and that the Town should look for ways of fostering year-round tourism.

With these points in mind, the following recommendations are made:

- > Include policies in the Tourism section of the CSP to clearly articulate the role of the Beach, Harbour, parks, and other Town-owned assets and facilities in the tourism industry, and how potential impacts from tourism are to be handled and harnessed.
- > Expand on policies in the initial draft CSP around year-round tourism to describe how Town intervention and private development can growth in winter recreational activities and indoor cultural activities.



Figure 14: Colchester Schoolhouse, which has potential for adaptive re-use to serve as a community and cultural hub (Source: Heritage Colchester)

- > This section of the CSP can also elaborate on how potential uses at the Colchester Schoolhouse can support attracting visitors year-round. Based on community consultation throughout the Official Plan project, there is strong and repeated support for the Schoolhouse redeveloping as a cultural and community hub. There may be opportunities to identify future partnerships with cultural institutions in the Windsor-Essex region to guide the future form and adaptive re-use of the Schoolhouse.

Infrastructure and Parking

A concern which was repeatedly heard from the community regarding the initial draft CSP was the perception that Colchester's infrastructure (roads, water service, sanitary sewer service, stormwater management, and parking) cannot handle any new development. This is a reasonable concern, however it is one that the Town has been proactively addressing.

As part of the first phase of work on the Official Plan project, a Parking Study for Colchester was completed by WSP, which outlined recommendations for the Town for managing parking impacts from current and future land uses. Most of these recommendations are to be implemented outside of land use planning, but those recommendations related to policy were included in the initial draft CSP.

Regarding services, there is adequate drinking water service from the Harrow and Colchester South Water Treatment Plant to support all new growth in the Secondary Plan Area.

Based on Town infrastructure planning, including the completed Environmental Assessment for the potential expansion of the Colchester South Wastewater Treatment Plant, there is available capacity in the wastewater system to support low-density development on the remaining vacant lands in Colchester and the adjacent Lakeshore West residential area, with minor upgrades required to pump stations.

The development of remaining lands in the Lakeshore West Residential SSA could theoretically proceed within the current design capacity of the wastewater system, but this development may need to be limited to low-density typologies to avoid expansion to the CSWWTP. However, future upgrades to the wastewater system may still be required should actual wastewater flows exceed the facilities rated capacity. More details on this matter can be found in the Settlement Area Review Final Report also released in May 2026.

Regarding stormwater, in recent years localized flooding along County Road 50 west of Colchester during heavy rainfall has become a recurring issue. This issue has not presented itself in the Hamlet proper, although access from the west may be limited during these flood events. The Town and County are examining solutions to this issue through a separate process, and the development of Colchester to the Vision of the CSP is not expected to exacerbate the issue.

The following recommendations are made:

- > Retain existing draft policies for servicing infrastructure and make clear that development must be supported by full and adequate municipal water and sanitary services, subject to the approval of the Town and the outcomes of any Environmental Assessments and infrastructure upgrades.
- > Add new policy limiting the density of new development on remaining vacant lands in Colchester to with the design capacity of the wastewater system. This maximum density could be expressed in units per hectare, applied to the overall development site in question, and will be developed in coordination with Town staff.
- > Retain existing draft policies for stormwater management but add additional guidance around the placement of stormwater facilities in any new development. These facilities should be located on site away from street frontages, can be connected to public space and/or natural heritage features, and should be designed to incorporate green infrastructure wherever possible.
- > Retain existing draft policies for parking and reinforce that any new development (especially commercial uses) should not put any pressure on Town parking facilities, and should provide sufficient on-site parking.

