CHAPTER 4: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

This Chapter discusses and makes recommendations for future development in Chester. Given the strong public interest in protecting the Town's natural and cultural resources, the Plan next looks at appropriate future development that will maintain and enhance those resources.

Development History

Early European settlers were drawn to Chester by its abundant cedar stands and its navigable waters. As time passed, Chester's steep hills and flowing streams proved ideal for water-powered industries, many of which involved wood products and the manufacture of woodworking tools. Eventually, roads replaced waterways as major transportation corridors. Electrical power for industrial processing reduced or eliminated the advantage of water power. Chester became less of a center of commerce and settled into a more quiet existence. Water-powered factories were torn down or converted to other less intensive industrial, commercial, or even residential uses.

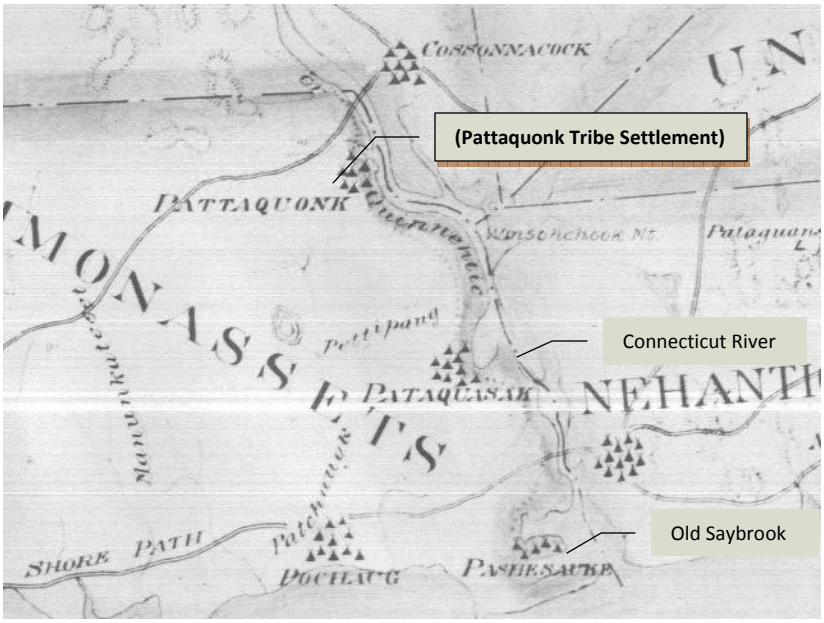

Figure 4-1 – Chester Native American Tribes
(Source: Online Link: http://magic.lib.uconn.edu/cgi-bin/MAGIC_HistList.pl)

The Valley Railroad and its bridge over the Pattaconk Brook left much of Chester cut off from the Connecticut River and its former maritime linkage. Active from 1871 through 1968 when the last freight train ran, the railroad property was subsequently purchased by the State as parkland, with an agreement to operate a private recreational railroad museum along a portion of the tracks. Over time, Route 154 (Old Route 9) became the principal vehicle corridor on the west side of the Connecticut River. In other communities where Route 154 passed through local villages, automobile-related growth occurred in the downtowns. As a result of being bypassed by Route 154, Chester Center did not experience this transition and hence avoided the demolition and replacement of many of its older buildings. The construction and opening of the new State Route 9, cutting through the forested uplands of Chester, did little to encourage automobile-related growth in town. Small industrial facilities changed ownership and products. An

industrial park on Inspiration Lane was created on a ridge near Route 9's Exit 6. Additional industrial facilities were built near the Chester Airport in the southwestern part of town. Marinas expanded to fill their physical limits. As the provision of retail services evolved from a local to a regional model, Chester residents began to shop outside the town's borders for basic goods and services. The nature of the Village Center shifted from neighborhood service establishments to a more visitor-oriented, arts-focused mix of shops and restaurants.

Figure 4-2 – Chester in the 1800s (Source: Walling, Henry Francis, 1825-1888
Online Link: http://magic.lib.uconn.edu/cgi-bin/MAGIC_HistList.pl)

Current Economic Base

A "Grand List" of assessed property in each Connecticut town is compiled annually by town assessors effective on October first of each year. The assessed value of property is based on a study of fair market values for comparable properties. Periodically, the entire grand list is revalued to reflect current sales data. Chester went through a new revaluation in October of 2008. Chester's grand list for 2004 was over $400 million. The highest valued property was Chester Village West operated by Chester Woods, Inc., (over $15 million) which comprised 3.7% of the Grand List, followed by the Connecticut Water Company ($5.8 million) at 1.4%. Whelen Engineering, the Eastern Company (Greenwald), and RotoFrank of America rounded out the top five.

Demographics

The characteristics of any population group change over time. The basic source of demographic information is the U.S. Census, which is conducted every ten years. Other federal and state agencies supplement the Census data with updated information in many forms. Almost all data, including much of the Census data, is based on sample information which is decreasingly reliable for smaller units of population such as Chester. Over the years, Chester's household size has become smaller as the birthrate has declined and extended multi-generational families are separated by relocation. The percentage of elderly as a component of Chester's population has increased as people live longer, current residents stay in their own homes longer, and others reside in residential complexes designed for the elderly.

Population

The population of Chester has grown at a slow but steady rate over the past four decades. Since 1950, Chester's population has grown more slowly than that of any town in the Estuary Region other than the town of Lyme. The 2000 Census counted 3,743 people residing in Chester. In 2006, the town's population was estimated to be 4,111 people. By 2011 the Connecticut Economic Research Center estimates the population will grow to a total of 4,401 people.

Density

The in-migration and out-migration of people in existing housing and the addition of new subdivision housing throughout town produces a feeling that the town's population is growing more rapidly than is actually the case. Since much of Chester is unavailable for housing development, that which does occur is often close to existing development. The Town of Chester encompasses an area of 16.9 square miles, of which 16 square miles is land

Chester Top 10 Taxpayers
Total Assessment in Blue

Chester Woods, Inc. (Chester Village West)
(15, 279,740)

Connecticut Water Company
(5,761,400)

Whelen Engineering Company, Inc.
(4,930,930)

The Eastern Company (Greenwald)
(3,622, 140)

Connecticut Light and Power
(3,196,710)

Roto Frank of America, Inc.
(3,181, 320)

Quantum 318, LLC
(2,862,000)

Whelen Aviation, LLC
(2, 627, 600)

Sbriglio,Margaret and Robert
(2,278, 6000)

ASW, LLC
(2, 084, 810)

Source: Chester Assessor Records (2006)

Figure 4-3 Business Park at Inspiration Lane (Source: LJD 2008)

area. The 1990 Census indicated an average population density of 213 people per square mile. By the 2000 Census, density had increased slightly to 234 people per square mile. In comparison, nearby Clinton, which has a similar land area (16.3 sq. miles), had 818 people per square mile. Further down the coast, Bridgeport, Connecticut, also with 16 square miles of land area, had a density of 8,212 people per square mile. A reduction in household size between 1990 and 2000, from 2.57 to 2.38 people per household, means that the population is more widely distributed in an increased number of dwelling units.

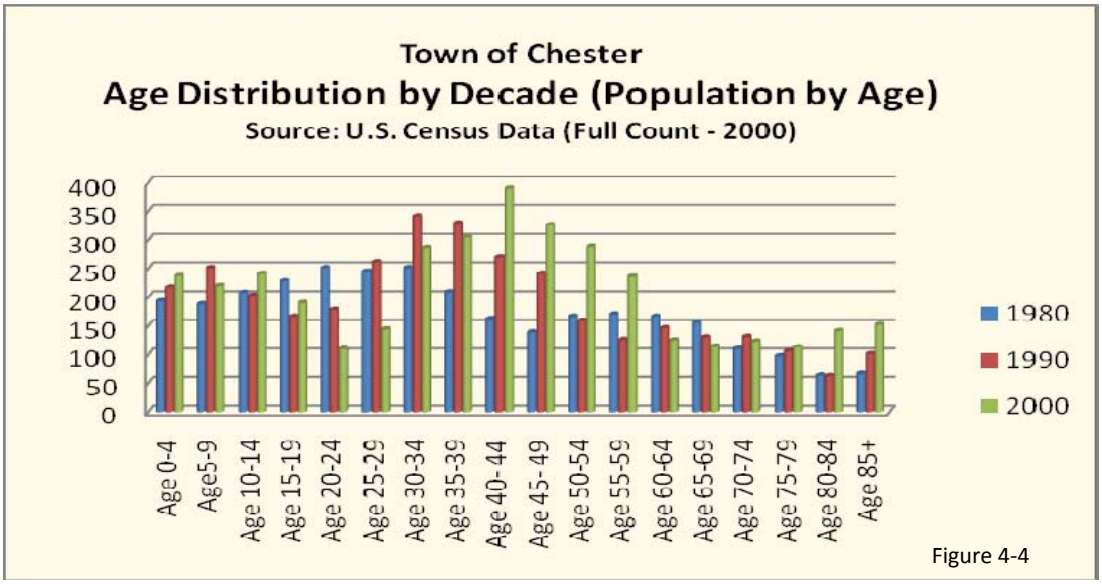

Figure 4-4

Ethnicity

Based on the most recent census data (2000), the resident population of Chester is primarily white, with a small representation of major minority groups. Three percent of the population identified themselves as Hispanic, one percent as Black, and one percent as Asian.

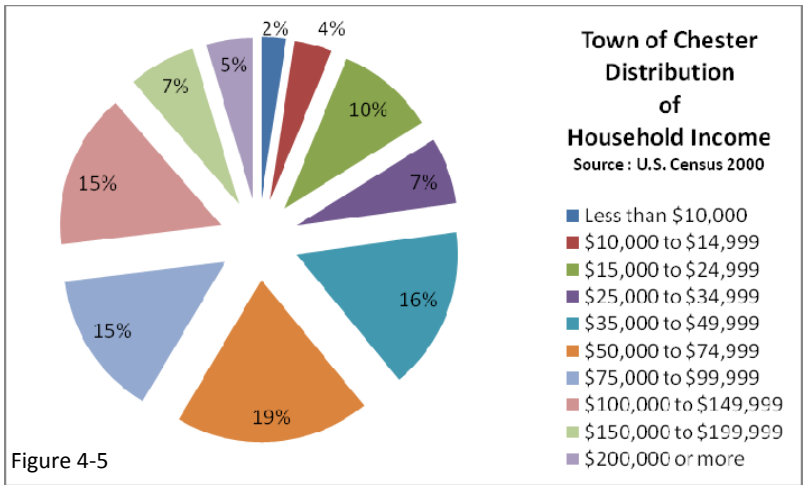

Figure 4-5

Labor Force

In July 2007, the Connecticut Department of Labor estimated that there were 2,333 people in the labor force from Chester. Of those, 2,236 people were employed, resulting in an unemployment rate of 4.2%. (People not actively looking for a job are counted as "not in the labor force.") Chester is often thought of as a bedroom community, with residents commuting to jobs outside the Town. However, about one quarter of the workforce both live and work here, many working from their homes. According to the Middlesex Chamber of Commerce, the most common out-of-town destination in 2004 was Middletown (220), followed by Old Saybrook (133), Deep River (105), Hartford (77) and New Haven (54). Journey-to-work data showed that most workers drove to work alone, while fifty people walked to work, and 19 used public transit.

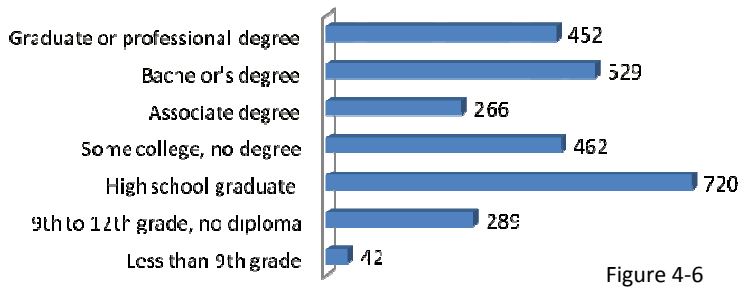

Figure 4-6

Two of the top five employers in Chester are manufacturing firms. Whelen Engineering Company, which began as a garage operation in Deep River in 1952, now makes products for the emergency warning industry in a 125,000 square foot plant on Winthrop Road. Whelen has an additional facility in Charlestown, NH. Greenwald Industries, on Route 154, manufactures components for coin-operated equipment and electronic card readers. Two other major employers are residential care facilities – Chester Village West, a life care facility, and Chesterfield Health Care Center. Also among the five largest employers is First Student, part of a larger national transportation company, which employs bus drivers and mechanics for the Region 4 school district.

Town of Chester

TOP FIVE EMPLOYERS

Whelen Engineering

Chester Village West

Greenwald Industries

First Student Transportation

Chesterfield Healthcare

2006

Reasons for Economic Development

This Plan is a statement of goals, policies and standards for the physical and economic development of the municipality. In many communities, "economic development" is viewed as an end in itself, with little consideration of why such development is wanted, or what kind of economic development is consistent with the town's vision for its future.

There are many reasons for economic development. One goal often cited is to expand the town's non-residential property tax base, on the theory that this will lessen the property tax burden for residential owners. Economic development is also sought to create or maintain jobs for area residents and new residents who will be customers of local businesses. Providing services and amenities for residents, visitors and the local workforce enhances the sense of community and maintains diversity. A more narrow purpose of economic development is to increase the wealth of individual property owners and investors. A report discussing these purposes, entitled "Chester, Connecticut, a Review of Future Development Options", was prepared for the Chester Planning and Zoning Commission by the Connecticut River Estuary Regional Planning Agency in April 1999.

Figure 4-7- Aerial Photo of Whelen Engineering-Route 145 (Source: CRERPA/CLEAR/NOAA 2004)

During the Commission's workshops for this Plan, some participants expressed concern about the increasing cost of living in Chester. Some feared that the cost may become so high that people will be forced to move to less expensive locations. Others were concerned that children raised in Chester may not be able to afford to live in their hometown as adults. Much of the blame for this situation was attributed to increased property taxes in Chester. The heavy reliance on property taxes to pay for local government services is a problem in places like Chester where real estate taxes are the primary means of funding local government and schools.

Property taxes are only a portion of the increasing cost of living, which includes other rising costs such as energy, insurance, food, transportation and medical care. Property taxes are one component, however, that residents feel they can influence more than some of the other costs. New development is often promoted with the argument that it is a "solution" to higher property taxes and will ease the tax burden for existing residents.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness that new economic development also has costs. The correlation between new residential development and rising school costs, which is often the biggest item in rural community budgets, has become apparent. To a lesser degree, there is a growing awareness that non-residential development may also have costs that reduce or negate

Figure 4-8 – Greenwald Industries – (Source: Cummings & Good)

the benefits of a larger tax base. Some of the costs of new development are obvious, such as an increase in the need for local services like fire and police protection. Other costs are less obvious, such as the cost of a diminished quality of life due to noise, lights, traffic or incompatible design that alters the character of the community. Many believe that a tax base should be "balanced" between residential and non-residential uses, although there is little agreement on what constitutes that "balance". Among its neighbors in the Estuary region, Chester has the highest percentage of its tax base attributed to commercial and industrial development. The amount of new development necessary to impact the property tax rate within the town by building more commercial or industrial property is significant. A new Chester Village West would only lower the mil rate by 0.7 mils. It would take five new Whelen Engineering complexes to reduce the mil rate by one mil. Any increase in Grand List due to increased development inevitably increases the cost of providing required services.

Chester must take a realistic view of what new economic development can accomplish. Development is essential to a healthy community, because the needs of the community change and new facilities and services are necessary to meet those changing needs. Services and amenities for residents and visitors, jobs, and diversity are all important considerations. In planning for the physical and economic development of the town, the Planning and Zoning Commission must examine all costs and benefits of potential development, financial and non-financial, tangible and intangible, to assure that the overall impact of such development is positive for the community.

Growth Potential

At 16 square miles, Chester is small in geographic area. Much of the town is protected as state forest and water company land. Other undeveloped areas in town have severe limitations for development in the form of difficult soils and steep slopes. Chester has grown more slowly than its neighbors in part due to such limitations. The town, which thrived on early water-borne transportation and water power, did not need to develop an alternative infrastructure until after many other towns had

become more modernized. Along with limited available land, the town's infrastructure is not designed for large scale development today. These two factors have shielded Chester from the dramatic changes taking place nearby. Developers look at a wide range of criteria when deciding where to locate a new development. These include topography and soils, ease of access, infrastructure, parcel size and parcel availability. Factors influencing locational decisions include ease of access, proximity to markets, financial incentives, the labor pool, ambiance, and competition. Some area towns have been inundated with large development proposals over the past several decades, especially near I-95 Interchanges and along Route One. These proposals have included grocery and fast food chains, home improvement centers, and pharmacy chains. While Chester remains "out of the way" for such ambitious projects, it is ripe for numerous smaller projects, the incremental impact of which can significantly change the town. Chester will eventually be faced with decisions to allow proposed development of potentially incompatible character, or to shape development in a manner which preserves its unique natural and cultural resources.

Town	Median Age	Land Area square miles	2005 POP.	2004 Net Grand List	2001 Equalized Grand List	2002 Actual Mil Rate	2002 Equalized Mil Rate	% Commercial /Industrial
Chester	44	16	4,111	607,060,188	547,697,440	21.9	15.3	16.3
Essex	46	10	7,203	996,408,474	1,412,372,140	14.9	10.4	13.6
Clinton	41	16	13,953	963,726,880	2,112,065,902	29	13	13.5
Westbrook	44	16	6,755	788,885,942	1,564,365,630	20.2	9.9	13.5
Old Saybrook	47	15	10,944	1,871,456,341	2,642,204,519	13.8	9.6	10.9
Deep River	42	14	6,885	386,651,070	727,752,679	28.1	14	8.1
East Haddam	41	54	9,320	668,663,049	1,187,804,658	25.35	13.9	5.9
Old Lyme	45	23	7,639	1,465,499,337	2,096,600,541	25.5	11	5.1
Haddam	43	44	7,732	612,106,250	1,091,294,023	29.5	16.1	3.5
Killingworth	42	35	6,648	568,720,060	1,005,072,452	24.8	13.8	2.7
Lyme	49	32	2,101	508,525,669	707,249,809	12.4	8.7	0.08

Source: Connecticut Economic Resource Center: CERC Figure 4-9

Compatible Development

Maintaining the character of Chester has been identified as a principal goal of future growth management. New development should be of a scale, density and intensity of activity so as to be consistent with the small town character of Chester. Large scale development projects, even if for the purpose of enhancing the tax base, are inappropriate for Chester. Large scale buildings and activities which generate a significant amount of traffic should be discouraged or prohibited. In a modern economy where change is the norm, products, services and the need for specific workforce skills may come

and go very rapidly. Upcoming changes in telecommunications technology, availability of resources for production, and globalization of the economy will result in further changes and dislocations. Small projects, on a scale suitable for Chester, are more likely to have lasting benefits without damaging the character of the town.

RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:

1. Encourage appropriate mixed-use and non-residential development which is compatible in scale and design with the character of the town with minimal impact on natural resources.

2. Prohibit large scale development or commercial activities which adversely impact the surrounding area. Chester should not duplicate large regional retail and service facilities found in nearby towns. This is consistent with the State Plan of Conservation and Development. Small retail, office, service and mixed-use establishments will be encouraged in specific areas to serve the everyday needs of residents and visitors.

3. Provide public transit between Chester and regional retail, recreational, medical and employment opportunities.

4. Recognize and encourage retention of the industrial heritage that shaped Chester by retaining existing industry where appropriate.

5. Encourage adaptive reuse of historic industrial structures as part of the cultural landscape.

6. Encourage development that will neither create a need for significant new infrastructure improvements nor overstress the town's existing infrastructure.

7. Where appropriate, limit development to sites with the soil capacity to support onsite sewage disposal and water.

8. Review regulations for all commercial and industrial zones to ensure that the uses and standards result in development that is in harmony with the character of the area in which it is located. Develop specific criteria for non-residential zones to reflect character differences in each area, with emphasis on appropriate scale.

9. Encourage low impact, sustainable development using "green building" principles.

Existing Commercial and Industrial Areas

Chester uses four zoning categories (commercial, RLM, CDD and WDD) to designate seven areas scattered around the town for commercial and industrial uses. In addition, some uses which may be considered commercial in nature are permitted in residential districts under special permit. These uses include hospitals, convalescent homes, day care centers, schools, dog kennels, riding stables, life care facilities, boarding houses and bed and breakfast establishments. There are also a substantial number of commercial entities located outside of commercial zones that have the status of pre-existing non-conforming uses. The 1999 CRERPA report "A Review of Future Development Options"

looked at each of the existing non-residential zones in detail. Most of the recommendations in that report are still applicable and are incorporated into this Plan. Additional recommendations address issues of scale and design within existing zones.

Chester Village Center

Figure 4-10 – Main Street Chester (Source: Caryn B. Davis)

The 1969 Chester Plan of Development, responding to concerns about the "run-down" condition of Chester Center, envisioned the future village area as a "controlled development district" serving as the commercial center for the town. The Plan stated the following: "Additional parking facilities and a new old seaport character are proposed to give Chester Center the added convenience and attractiveness found in most new shopping centers. The proposed development is aimed at once more establishing the Center as the commercial hub of the town, and, perhaps, includes the northern portions of Killingworth and Deep River, and the southern section of Haddam within its service area." That Plan was developed during a period of national interest in urban renewal, when federal funding was available for major renovation of town and city neighborhoods. Fortunately, the Town chose not to demolish the existing buildings in favor of a "new shopping center." Subsequent awareness of the town's cultural heritage makes such drastic change unlikely today. The 1995 Plan established a policy to "endeavor to maintain the town center as a focus for commercial and municipal activities in order to retain its vitality and functioning as a 'community meeting place'."

Chester Center is the heart of the town. In the State Conservation and Development Policies Plan for Connecticut, 2005-2010, the village area is identified as a Rural Community Center. The State policy for rural community centers is to "promote concentration of mixed use development such as municipal facilities, employment, shopping and residential uses within a village center setting." Numerous efforts have been made to define and protect the character and functioning of the Center. Chester Center is the focus of many community events, celebrations and other gatherings. Despite the relocation of the Chester Town Hall out of the Center to Route 154, the center remains a place for community gatherings such as parades and festivals. Through the efforts of the Chester Merchants Association, such events are coordinated to enhance business opportunities. Chapter Seven of this Plan addresses and identifies the issues and recommendations for the Center in detail and will identify specific implementation steps that need to be taken to assure that the town's heart remains healthy.

About 47 acres in Chester Center are zoned for commercial uses. The Commercial District allows all uses permitted in residential zones, plus a wide range of retail and service uses. Additional uses are allowed by Special Permit. Given the expressed goal to retain the village character, the list of permitted uses must be re-examined for compatibility with that goal. A subject of considerable discussion, the zoning regulations include few standards to guide the design of new development in the Center. In fact, the same district regulations apply to the Commercial District on Route 154, a much different environment.

Issues addressed in Chapter Seven include the delineation of the Center boundaries. There has been discussion of expanding the Commercial District along Main Street east to Route 154 to allow additional uses, while others are concerned that this could mean the weakening of a compact, pedestrian-oriented center of activity. There have been other efforts to attempt to link the Center with North Quarter Park through a walkway, which might be more likely to be accomplished if new commercial development is allowed along Main Street. Adequate parking has been a longstanding issue for the Center, with several efforts to fix the problem. Despite measures taken, adequate parking, and its visibility, remains a concern.

Figure 4-11 – Chester Village Center (Source: CRERPA/2004)

The density of development in the Center has resulted in sewage disposal problems in the past. In 1985, a community sewerage system was built adjacent to Chester Creek to treat effluent from the Village Center. For several years the Town has been under order from the State Department of Environmental Protection to further abate continuing pollution of the Creek. While there is little disagreement that pollution exists and should be abated, the method used for abating the problem has been vigorously debated. In October 2007, Chester residents voted to approve the construction of a limited central sewer system discharging to the Deep River sewage treatment plant.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendations for the Chester Center area are discussed in Chapter Seven.

Marinas – Waterfront Design Districts

Chester occupies approximately 2.8 miles of shoreline on the west bank of the Connecticut River, about 12 miles upstream from the junction with Long Island Sound. In 2006, a survey by CRERPA counted seven marinas or yacht clubs along the shore, with a combined total of 854 slips.

Currently all facilities are full, with waiting lists. The largest area of marine commercial use is concentrated along the Chester Creek from the Connecticut River back to the Valley Railroad Bridge, located over three thousand feet upstream. The bridge clearance restricts most water craft from moving further up creek. The Hays Haven Marina, Castle Marina and Chester Marina are located near the entrance of Chester Creek in the southern Waterfront Design District (WDD). The Springfield Yacht Club and the Pattaconk Yacht Club are further up Chester Creek. Aside from Chester Creek, there are no coves or protected anchorages along the waterfront. Most of the riverfront is lined with marshes and shoals. The Chrisholm Marina is located directly on the river in the northern portion of the WDD. Near the Haddam town line, the Middlesex Yacht Club has facilities in a residentially-zoned area. Most of the marinas have winter storage capacity for boats. There are two public launch sites along the River, with public viewing and six slips for transient boats.

Figure 4-12 – Chester Village Center Aerial
(Source: CRERPA/CLEAR/NOAA 2004)

Within the WDD, existing marinas appear to have reached their full growth potential, except for provision of marina-related amenities such as marine stores and services or food service. Under Connecticut's coastal management statutes, waterfront sites must be reserved for water-dependent uses.

Access to the marinas from the landward side is across the tracks of the Valley Railroad. While used recreationally for excursions by the Valley Railroad, the tracks have been discussed as a means of providing public transit from the Long Island Sound towns to the Middletown and Hartford areas, integrated with the tourist activities. Safety would certainly become an issue if railroad service were expanded along the line.

The Planning and Zoning Commission adopted a Coastal Area Management Plan for the town's coastal area in 1983. The Commission's jurisdiction was limited to land within the town above the mean high water line. The Town Meeting approved creation of a Chester Harbor Management Commission in 1990. That Commission adopted a Harbor Management Plan in April of 1994. Their

jurisdiction covers tidal and intertidal waters below the mean high water line within territorial limits of the town, including the intertidal area of Chester Creek to the center of town, about 1.8 miles from the creek's juncture with the Connecticut River. It is essential that these two agencies work together closely to assure that waterfront development is appropriate for the town.

Figure 4-13 – Chester Creek in the Lower Chester Cove Section (Source: CRERPA/CLEAR/NOAA 2004)

RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING WATERFRONT DESIGN DISTRICT (WDD):

10. Review current WDD zoning regulations to determine whether additional accessory uses are appropriate for the area, including marine supply retail, seasonal restaurants, and boat storage. Carefully review plans to ensure that hazardous materials associated with marine uses are protected during flooding. Any additional activity in the WDD should recognize the inevitability of flooding within the Connecticut River's floodplain.

11. Maximize use of the Chester waterfront for water-dependent uses.

12. Coordinate with the Harbor Management Commission to review permits for new WDD development proposals.

Controlled Development District (CDD) - Inspiration Lane

The Controlled Development District encompasses approximately 43.6 acres, accessed by Inspiration Lane from Route 148, just east of Exit 6 off Route 9. Inspiration Lane is a steep and curving roadway, designed to overcome the steep hillside which rises in excess of 200 feet above Route 148. At the bottom of the hill, the intersection of Inspiration Lane and West Main Street forms a very sharp angle, with limited visibility for drivers on both roads. The CDD abuts several large parcels of residentially zoned land which have frontage on Wig Hill Road, which is unsuitable for significant traffic. The most easily developed land within the CDD has already been developed and the remaining land is limited in its ability to support new development. The CDD allows all uses permitted within the residential districts by right. An almost unlimited range of commercial and industrial uses are allowed by special permit. Basically, almost any use allowed anywhere in town is allowed in the CDD.

In recent years, it has been proposed to extend the Connecticut Water Company public water line to the CDD. Extreme caution must be used in allowing heavy water users in the Industrial Park,

since the importation of additional water to the area will make it difficult to accommodate on-site sewage disposal.

RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING CONTROLLED DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT (CDD):

13. Review uses allowed in the CDD to assure that future development in the area is consistent with resource limitations and minimizes adverse impacts on adjacent residential properties. Limit development to uses that do not require extension of public water to the industrial park.

14. Limit further expansion of the present boundaries of the Controlled Development District. Although the most suitable land within the District has been developed, reuse or repurposing of existing development should be encouraged if vacancies occur.

15. Continue to seek ways to improve traffic safety and visibility at the intersection of Inspiration Lane and Route 148.

Research and Light Manufacturing District (RLM) – Winthrop Road/Chester Airport Area

Three areas in Chester are zoned as RLM. Two of those areas are located east of Route 154, and will be discussed along with other uses along 154. The third and largest area includes about 120 acres on Winthrop Road surrounding Chester Airport. The RLM allows any uses permitted in residential districts, plus research and development or manufacturing, processing, storage or assembling of commodities, goods or products. Airports are permitted as a special permit use.

Chester Airport is privately owned by Whelen Aviation. As of August 2007, there were 115 aircraft based at the field, most of which (100) were single-engine planes. There were 10 multi-engine planes, three helicopters and two ultralights. There are two paved runways, with a maximum length of 2,566 feet, fifty feet wide, and capable of handling planes up to 8500 pounds. Chester Airport is open to the public. The airport is not part of the State's airport planning and is not listed as a major facility. Room for airport expansion is limited.

Figure 4-14- Aerial view of Inspiration Lane Business Park (Source: CRERPA/CLEAR/NOAA 2004)

There appears to be room within the RLM zone on Winthrop Road for additional research and industrial development without adversely affecting neighboring residential areas. The Airport land itself might be a suitable development site, but it has been the stated policy of the town to encourage maintenance of the airport as functioning entity. It is an unusual amenity that may make Chester more attractive to business owners. In the event that consideration is given to closing the airport, the Town should work with owners to determine if there are alternatives to closure.

RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING RESEARCH AND LIGHT MANUFACTURING DISTRICT (RLM):

16. Encourage owners of Chester Airport to maintain a functioning airport that is open for public use.

17. Encourage expansion of existing businesses in the RLM District, consistent with natural and cultural resource constraints.

Airport Operational Statistics 2006	
Aircraft based on the field: 115	Aircraft operations: avg-57/day
Single engine airplanes: 100	41% Transient General Aviation
Multi-engine airplanes: 10	39% Local General Aviation
Helicopters: 3	20% Air Taxi

Route 154 Development

Route 154 (Old Route 9) is bordered by a wide mixture of uses. Originally known as the Middlesex Turnpike, Route 154 has been a major through route along the western bank of the Connecticut River since the construction of the bridge over Chester Creek in 1816. Current zoning along the road is primarily residential, but also includes commercial and industrial zoning. Route 154 also provides the only vehicular access to the Waterfront Design District areas along the Connecticut River. Two areas east of Route 154 are currently zoned as Research and Light Manufacturing (RLM), the same zoning category as the Chester Airport area. The former Susan Bates factory, now Greenwald Industries, includes about 16.6 acres. An area in excess of five acres is located on the south side of Denlar Drive. About eight acres on the west side of Route 154 are zoned commercial and include the Chester Town Hall, which was relocated from Chester Center in 2002. The Route 154 Commercial District is zoned identically to Chester Center. The Chester Fairgrounds is zoned for residential one acre lots.

From the Deep River town line to the Haddam town line, land uses along Route 154 transition quickly among strip commercial development, industrial development, and rural residential uses. There is very little continuity of use or design. Access to abutting properties also varies, with roads and driveways of all sorts and varied separation distances. The Chester Economic Development

Commission (EDC) examined land uses along Route 154 and forwarded recommendations to the Planning and Zoning Commission for changes in current zoning. In particular, the EDC focused on possible expansion of the commercial zone to both sides of Route 154 northward from the Chester Town Hall to Parkers Point Road. The recommendations of the EDC have been considered as part of this Plan.

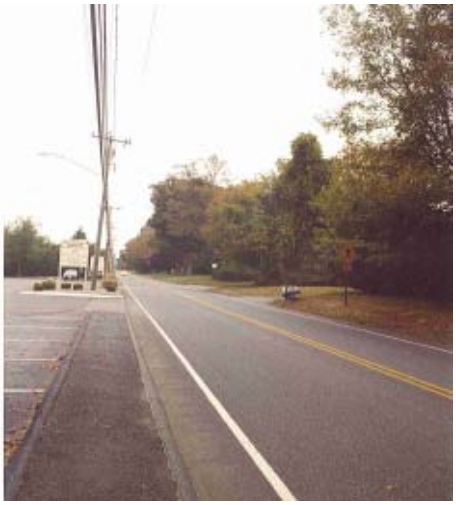

Figure 4-15 Route 154 – Rural conflicts with commercial aesthetics

Development along Route 154 can be described as "eclectic," with uses, styles and design from many periods in the past. Soils vary in suitability for on-site sewage disposal, but much of the better land has already been developed. Several large tracts of land (including the Fairgrounds) remain. If Chester wishes to retain its small town character, it will be necessary to develop general zoning standards for the entire length of Route 154 in Chester, rather than continuing to use zoning district regulations that are better suited to other areas of town. Much of the length of Route 154 appears suitable for small-scale mixed uses.

Figure 4-16: Route 154 – Town Hall/Bank. Landscaping heading in right direction. (Source: LJD/CRERPA 2007)

Maximum building square footage, low lot coverage, front yard setbacks, generous landscaping requirements, and some uniform characteristics for signage will help create an attractive visual corridor, regardless of use. Within this corridor, individual subareas can be created that allow new uses consistent with the historic land use pattern that have evolved over time. Additional commercial and community uses can be encouraged at current points of more dense development consistent with soil capacity. These include the areas around Town Hall and the intersection of Main Street and Route 154. A new industrial subarea can be designed for the existing RLM areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING ROUTE 154:

18. Consider overlay zoning standards for the length of Route 154 and encourage development that is consistent with the current small town character of land use along the highway. Develop standards with appropriate design professionals that address building size, architecture, lot coverage, access, underground utilities and landscaping.

19. Identify and develop zoning standards for specific commercial/mixed use hub areas where current uses are concentrated, including the town hall area and the intersection of Main Street

and Route 154. Consistent with the State Plan of Conservation and Development, include only those uses which provide neighborhood or town-wide services, while prohibiting large or regional retail facilities.

20. Review current RLM zoning along 154 to address the character of the Middlesex Turnpike and allow a smooth transition from industrial to residential and commercial uses.

21. Place a moratorium on expansion of non-conforming uses in residential zones on Route 154 pending the development of the overlay zone.

22. Review status of Fairgrounds and determine if current residential zoning is still appropriate.

23. Economic development along Route 154 should be sensitive to the economic and cultural vitality of the Village Center.

Non-Residential Development in Residential Zones

Historically, Chester has included a variety of mixed uses in its residential districts. In older residential areas, customary home occupations and accessory apartments were part of many traditional homesteads. Uniform residential subdivisions in Chester are a more recent land use pattern. Within these modern subdivisions, residents are often very sensitive to even minor differences in use from lot to lot. The character of the modern subdivision form is one of predictability and conformity. In many communities, residential zoning regulations have been adopted which foster this subdivision character without recognizing that there are alternatives that are more suitable to a rural landscape. With improved telecommunications, home occupations may become much more common. An area which promotes its rural charm to visitors can encourage longer stays within the area through the availability of guest rooms and bed and breakfast establishments. Accessory apartments can provide additional affordable housing units while allowing homeowners to help support the costs of owning a home.

Figure 4-17– Crossroad Intersection of Routes 154 and 148

RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING MIXED USE IN RESIDENTIAL ZONES:

24. Review the special principal uses in residential zones.

Agriculture

Like many other parts of New England, Chester once had a flourishing agricultural community, although the steep topography and limited soils were less than ideal for growing crops or supporting domestic animals. The best soils for agriculture were found in the area of the

Connecticut River and Cedar Lake (see Chapter Two – Soils). Today, most of the agricultural land has re-grown as upland forest or has been used for development purposes. With the increasing interest in energy conservation and healthy eating, there is a growing market for locally-produced foods and other farm products.

RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING AGRICULTURAL LAND:

25. Establish zoning regulations to encourage production and sale of local farm products.

26. Research tax incentives for the preservation of agricultural land.

Cedar Lake Area on Route 148

The 1969 Plan suggested the possibility of limited neighborhood shopping facilities in the Cedar Lake area. This area is currently not zoned for such uses. Concern for water quality in Cedar Lake requires that any additional uses in the area be approached very carefully. The popularity of the State Forest recreational area and of Cedar Lake, and the increasing year round population in that area provide a potential market for small retail or service activities. Preservation of Camp Hazen in its current form is an important goal. The Commission has been presented with Camp Hazen's ten-year plan of development and is supportive of the Camp's commitment to continued operation and improvement. Should the Camp ever find itself in a position to divest its operations, meetings between the town and camp officials should discuss possible arrangements for preservation of this critical recreational asset.

RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING CEDAR LAKE:

27. Limit both residential and non-residential uses in the Cedar Lake area to protect water quality.

28. Prepare guidelines for Town acquisition should any land within the Cedar Lake watershed become available.

Figure 4-18—Camp Hazen partners with North Cove Outfitters to host "Paddle sports Weekend" which draws visitors statewide to Chester (Source: North Cove Outfitters Paddle demo 2006 ® K.Lipeika)