

XIII. A REGIONAL GROWTH MANAGEMENT ACTION AGENDA

There are no easy tasks in the development of an action agenda for regional growth management. Regional planning agencies and other regional entities have extremely limited powers. Isolated, local growth management can too easily become exclusionary or simply deflect unmanaged growth to other areas. In this way, local growth management can actually promote more sprawl. Yet regional planning, as previous efforts in earlier decades have shown, is extremely difficult because of the fragmented land-use decision-making system in our state.

Many reports and literature on growth management end with generalized exhortations to “promote” or “encourage” certain activities or changes. In our planning process and this report, we have tried to avoid this syndrome (admittedly, not entirely successfully) by acknowledging the difficulty of regional growth management tasks, grouping the tasks to be accomplished by relative difficulty, and proposing specific actions.

At the second charrette session, on 11 February, NMCOG staff presented for discussion a series of regional growth management tasks that emerged from the thematic discussions of the previous session. In order to provide a realistic context for these tasks, the constraints and opportunities associated with each task were also presented. Finally, possible actions to be taken were presented.

THE HARD TASKS

- Preserve open space and develop a networked open space system
- Preserve historic resources

THE HARDER TASKS

- Implement a review system for developments of regional importance
- Revitalize town, village, and downtown commercial centers
- Direct economic development to underutilized urban and village sites
- Develop compact mixed-use business and commercial centers
- Improve design standards and developer incentives for open space residential subdivision design

THE HARDEST TASKS

- Decrease auto dependence
- Increase the use (not simply the availability) of public transportation
- Decrease traffic congestion
- Promote compact mixed-use centers including residences
- Promote a more equitable distribution of affordable housing in the region.

A. THE HARD TASKS

Open Space Preservation

Opportunities

- In principle, almost everybody is in favor of preserving open space.
- Every town has a local open space plan.

Constraints

- Funding for fee-simple acquisition of open space is limited.
- Preservation through easements and sale of development rights requires an effective information and

outreach campaign to property owners.

- Support for more open space masks contending interests and needs - open space for what? There are many uses for open space: individual property ownership, preservation of community character, active recreation, passive recreation, wildlife habitat, water resource preservation, flood control, etc.

Actions:

- Create an effective Regional Open Space Plan based on criteria agreed to by municipalities in a Memorandum of Agreement.
- Create an alliance of local land trusts with the possible goal of uniting as a regional land trust.
- Promote passage of the Community Preservation Act in the state legislature to permit towns to build up funds for the purchase of open space.
- Create a public information and assistance campaign on conservation easements and other ways that private landowners can preserve open space.

Historic Resources Preservation

Opportunities

- The region has a strong sense of its historic roots and identity.
- Lowell is a national example of how to give importance to the industrial history of the region.
- Historic preservation is a strong component of community character.

Constraints

- All of our communities have historic structures and sites, but there are relatively few historic districts or preservation ordinances.
- Historic resources in many of our communities are dispersed and surrounded by newer development.
- Property owners often resist historic district ordinances because of the perceived intrusiveness of regulation and requirements. Historic restoration can be costly.

Actions:

- Create a forum for exchange of ideas and joint activities by local historic commissions and societies
- Create a regional historic preservation plan, building on the plan prepared in the 1970s.
- Explore the creation of regional routes of historic landmarks for colonial and revolutionary history, mill development, and so on, perhaps using the Essex County or Blackstone River models for ideas.

B. THE HARDER TASKS

Review system for developments of regional importance

Opportunities

- Inter-municipal conflicts arise in any case over developments on borders or large projects that affect wide areas.
- A review process could focus discussions for the resolution of conflict.

Constraints

- Local governments resist additional review processes.
- Additional review may be perceived as adding to the time cost of the permitting process.

Actions:

- Develop threshold criteria for developments of regional importance
- Draft a memorandum of agreement for regional municipalities designating NMCOG staff to perform a review and present results for approval by the Council and transmittal to the appropriate municipal officials and boards
- Publish the results of the review process

Revitalization of town center, village, and downtown commercial areas

Opportunities

- There are already efforts in this direction in some towns.
- There are examples outside our region of towns that have decided to create or recreate town centers where old ones have been destroyed by sprawl or never existed.

Constraints

- Resistance often exists to the higher density residential development or above-store apartments that create a neighborhood market for village/town centers.
- Design guidelines for development in centers must be applied both to new development and to redevelopment projects.

Actions:

- Take advantage of state technical assistance programs for downtown revitalization
- Include revitalization of town and village centers in master planning processes
- Create design guidelines for revitalization
- Provide zoning or other incentives for development in centers

Direct economic development to underutilized urban sites

Opportunities

- State and federal brownfields legislation now provides incentives for clean-up and redevelopment of contaminated sites.
- Urban buildings often can offer lower-cost space for start-up businesses.
- Urban residents have large aggregate purchasing power that is often not captured locally.
- Concentration on retaining existing businesses and helping them expand can be an effective strategy.

Constraints

- The property tax system encourages municipalities to compete against one another for non-residential business development.
- Almost all large businesses now expect some kind of incentive or benefit from municipalities when they decide to locate there.
- Corporate location decisions are often based on the residence of the CEO or proximity to the existing or desired educated work force, which works against many urban areas
- Urban areas can lack the communications infrastructure needed by technology firms.
- Poor image and stereotyping of urban areas and populations deters businesses.

Actions:

- Create a regional economic development council or authority (requires state approval)
- Market underutilized sites and provide incentives for redevelopment
- Provide modern telecommunications infrastructure to serve older sites
- Update, beautify, and maintain the public realm around older sites

Develop Concentrated Mixed-Use Centers

Opportunities

- Mixed-use development clustered in nodes around corporate developments provides employees with opportunities to complete shopping errands and go to lunch without having to use their cars, thus mitigating traffic congestion and limiting the number of curb cuts.
- Mixed-use can help balance development concentration and traffic congestion with accessibility, making up for lower traffic speeds.
- Mixed-use centers permit more preservation of community character along local roads.

Constraints

- Some towns have zoned for commercial or industrial development along local arterials in the belief that this will contain development and traffic congestion.
- Some large companies prefer to build self-contained facilities with internal eating areas and other amenities, in order to keep employees from leaving the work site during the day.

Actions:

- Create and circulate model zoning by-laws and incentive programs for mixed-use development
- Plan transportation improvements to promote mixed-use development
- Encourage Planning Boards to promote mixed-use development

Improve design standards and developer incentives for residential cluster development

Opportunities

- Examples of effective and attractive cluster development can be coupled with arguments for the environmental and open space benefits of cluster
- Cluster development with recreational open space and access to commercial and entertainment areas has proven attractive to the over-55 population
- Change “cluster” to “open space residential development”

Constraints

- Town fears of housing unlike standard single-family housing has created large regulatory hurdles for cluster development, such as approval by Town Meeting.
- Poorly done existing developments have given cluster development a bad image.
- Belief by some that large-lot zoning preserves open space.

Actions:

- Create and circulate model cluster zoning regulations
- Create and circulate visual representations and guidelines for cluster development site design and home design
- Seek co-sponsorship by the development industry of a regional conference on cluster development to develop workable regulatory and design review systems

B. THE HARDEST TASKS

Decrease auto dependence and increase the use (not just the availability) of public transportation

Opportunities

- Public frustration with traffic congestion is growing
- Businesses can take advantage of incentives for participation in Transportation Management Associations for their employees
- TEA-21 provides additional funds and opportunities for transit projects

Constraints

- Existing residential, employment, and commercial patterns require dependence on the auto for the majority of regional residents
- Public transportation must be perceived to be more convenient and comfortable than private autos to attract significant use

Actions:

- Encourage transit-friendly and transit-dependent mixed-used development rather than conventional suburban development
- Market the Greater Lowell TMA (Transportation Management Association) to more businesses in the region to widen participation in this state-supported program (50% state

2020 Vision: Planning for Growth in the Northern Middlesex Region
funds, 50% private)

- Form additional TMAs in areas not currently served by the Greater Lowell TMA
- Coordinate DEP approval of Transportation Management Plans with regional growth management planning for employers with 250+ employees
- Promote employer-based transportation management techniques such as telecommuting, flex time, guaranteed ride home, transit pass subsidies for employees, and ride-sharing
- Encourage the LRTA to pursue new funding programs, including “New Starts” to initiate transit service where practical and cost-effective

Decrease traffic congestion

Opportunities

- Levels of traffic congestion have steadily increased over the years, affecting quality of life for area residents and employees.

Constraints

- Our region cannot control the traffic burden coming from and going to other regions, particularly New Hampshire
- Limitations on transportation improvement funding during Big Dig construction
- Lack of a state transportation policy guided by growth management principles
- Lack of local political will to examine traffic improvements requiring construction as well as those that do not

Actions:

- Promote the use of measures to control traffic demand such as increased transit use, ride-sharing, bicycling and walking where practical
- Plan physical improvements for areas targeted for growth in regional plans, preserving local character in other areas
- Promote implementation of the regional transportation plan’s project to wide Route 3 as a means to remove traffic from parallel routes and town centers
- Promote implementation of the regional transportation plan’s projects for additional river crossing capacity in order to improve local and regional travel.

Promote mixed-use development, including residential development, breaking down the segregation of land uses.

Opportunities

- Revitalization of town and village centers can attract residential interest as people wish to be within walking distance of attractive commercial districts
- Employees in new business and commercial mixed use centers may wish to live nearby
- The dispersed patterns of residence, schools, recreational facilities, shopping, services, and employment are creating a tiring life style of constant driving for many regional residents
- As populations age, housing within walking distance of commercial centers, recreational areas and libraries, and entertainment becomes more attractive

Constraints

- In suburban areas, existing forms of auto-dependent commercial development are often unappealing to potential residents because of the perceived proximity to high-traffic corridors
- Segregation of land uses is perceived to guarantee the protection of housing values
- It is much more difficult to reverse existing sprawl development than to prevent new sprawl

Actions:

- Create and distribute model regulations and examples of best practices to encourage zoning and permitting for multiple mixed uses

More equitable distribution of affordable housing in the region

Opportunities

- High housing costs in many towns are pricing native sons and daughters, as well as the elderly, out of the market, providing a local incentive for creation of affordable housing
- New proposed federal initiatives will increase funding for affordable housing development
- Scattered site housing, first time homebuyer programs, and inclusionary affordable housing measures reduce the perceived effects of concentrated affordable housing development

Constraints

- Towns are reluctant to accept affordable housing except for the elderly and disabled
- Affordable housing is believed to have an adverse effect on nearby property values
- The common image of affordable housing as a concentration of dense and unattractive multifamily buildings contributes to a reluctance to accept it
- Current funding for affordable housing is very limited.

Actions:

- Advocate for affordable housing to be one of the permitted uses for funds collected under the proposed Community Preservation Act bill
- Promote a wider view of “affordability” so that it is not viewed as synonymous with “subsidized”
- Research and publish a review of regional affordable housing trends, focusing particularly on the location and distribution of housing.