

II. DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS IN THE NORTHERN MIDDLESEX REGION

The Northern Middlesex region is composed of the City of Lowell and eight surrounding towns: Billerica, Chelmsford, Dracut, Dunstable, Pepperell, Tewksbury, Tyngsborough, and Westford. Over the last fifty years, our part of Massachusetts has changed a great deal. Where there used to be a clear distinction between city and country, village and farm, our region is now a complex patchwork of city blocks, residential subdivisions, abandoned or underused mills, commercial retail strips and malls, industrial and office parks — and a few remaining farms, orchards, and forests. Individual municipalities try to balance residential, commercial, and industrial growth with preservation of open space, historic and cultural character, and environmental resources.

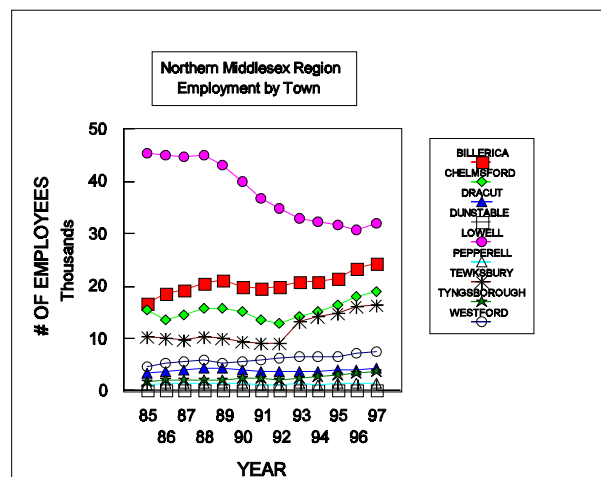
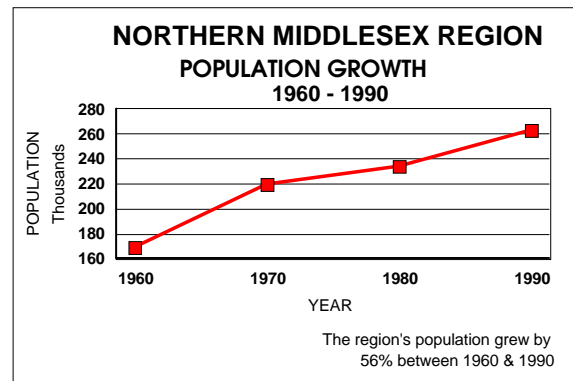
The biggest and most wrenching transformations in our regional character are probably behind us. Population will probably never again grow as quickly as it did in the 1960s, when our region was the fastest-growing in the state, and the consumption of rural land by development is no longer proceeding at the breakneck pace of the 1950s and 1960s. We have become a mature and predominantly suburban region.

But now, as we enter the twenty-first century, we need to decide what kind of place we want our region to be and how we want to live here. What should we do with what's left of the old rural and historic character? What kind of economic development do we want and where should it be located? How can we protect our environment? How can we provide enough housing at affordable prices?

Trends in the Northern Middlesex Region

In the past half-century, our region has been transformed from an industrial city surrounded by predominantly rural towns to a predominantly suburban environment surrounding a historic urban core. During the 1960s, Northern Middlesex was the fastest growing region in the state, with population growth of 30 percent during the decade. Much of that growth occurred in Billerica, Chelmsford, and Tewksbury. In the ensuing decades, residential growth has been moving into the other towns in the region. If current trends continue, by the early twenty-first century the region will be composed of relatively homogeneous and prosperous suburban towns surrounding a multicultural city with a declining industrial sector. The suburbanization of the Northern Middlesex region can be seen in changes in land use and in employment indicators:

Residential suburbanization. In 1940, nearly three-quarters of the regional population lived in the City of Lowell. Fifty years later, in 1990, less than 40 percent of the population lived in Lowell.

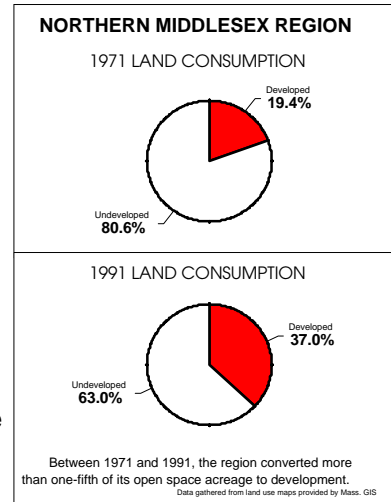
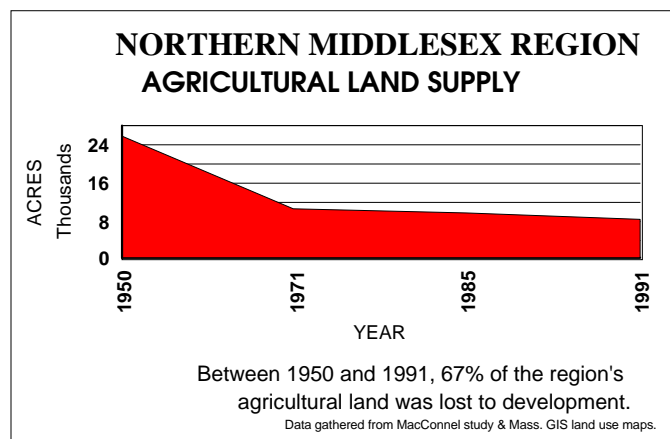
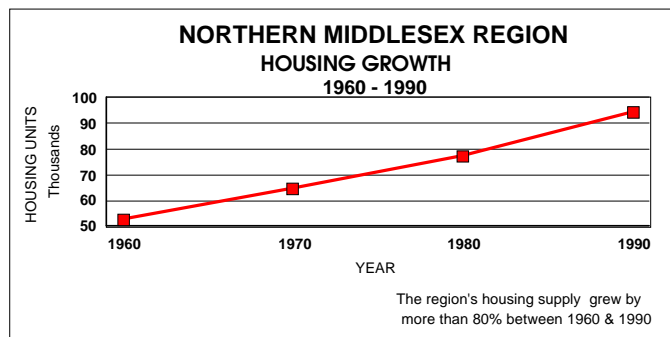


2020 Vision: Planning for Growth in the Northern Middlesex Region

Suburbanization of jobs. The towns are becoming important employment centers, particularly Billerica, Chelmsford, and Tewksbury. Lowell's share of regional jobs declined from 46 percent of all jobs in the region in 1985 to 32 percent of all jobs in the region ten years later in 1995. According to the 1990 census, 66 percent of adult workers living in the NMCOG region in 1990 had jobs outside center cities such as Lowell and Boston.

Land consumption. Land has been consumed for development at a much faster rate than the population has grown. In the early years of suburbanization, the differential was very great. For example, regional population grew 53 percent in the twenty years between 1950 and 1970, while the number of developed acres grew 155 percent in the twenty-five years between 1950 and 1975. Though not as startling, the differential continues in more recent years as the region has become a more mature suburban area. While population grew 13 percent in the 1980-1990 decade, land consumption increased by 20 percent in the six years between 1985 and 1991, reflecting the building boom of the late 1980s.

Growth in Housing Units. Another way to look at this question is to compare the growth in the number of housing units with the growth in population. Between 1970 and 1980, regional population grew only 6.8 percent, while the number of housing units grew 21 percent. In the following decade, 1980-1990, the growth rate for housing units remained approximately the same, at 22 percent, while the population grew 13 percent. In both decades, housing units grew faster than the population.



What these data show is that the number of households is growing faster than the population as a whole — a national trend as families tend to be smaller and more single-person households emerge. In a region like ours, these data also mean that land is being consumed for housing faster than the population is growing. This is true because a large proportion of these new housing units are single-family homes.

Fewer farms. One of the obvious consequences of these changes in land use is the decline of resource-based economic activities. Between 1950 and 1991, the amount of land used for agriculture in the region decreased 65 percent. This decline resulted from a combination of the extension of suburban residential development into the region and changing agricultural markets for New England producers.

As in other parts of Eastern Massachusetts, industrial and commercial development is increasingly dispersed throughout the Northern Middlesex region. Municipal reliance on

property taxes coupled with Proposition 2-1/2 limits on tax increases have encouraged most of the towns in the region to seek non-residential development in order to generate tax revenues to pay for town services. Commercial and industrial development is drawn to major highway and arterial road corridors.

By the 1970s, the results of breakneck development in the 1950s and 1960s had become obvious. Many Northern Middlesex residents began to worry about loss of open space, dwindling agriculture, traffic congestion, heavy demands on town services, expensive infrastructure improvements, and loss of community character — just as they continue to do today.

Growth Planning in the 1970s

In the mid-1970s, the Northern Middlesex Area Commission (predecessor agency to the Council of Governments), conducted a regional planning process with its member communities. Two documents on growth and development policies for the region emerged from the process: *A Growth Policy for the Northern Middlesex Region* (1976), and *Development Policies for the Northern Middlesex Area* (1978). These documents identified trends in place at that time and suggested policy alternatives. What has happened in these twenty years? Were any of the recommended policies implemented and what effect did they have?

Planners in the mid- and late 1970s characterized Dracut and Westford as “ex-urban,” that is, no longer rural, but with very low density suburban development. Pepperell, Tyngsborough, and Dunstable were still regarded as fundamentally rural in character, although not necessarily predominantly agricultural. Lowell residents, despite the continuing decline of the city’s traditional industrial economy, were optimistic in the seventies about the planned state and federal historical parks, which they hoped would attract tourists, enhance the city’s image, and leverage private investment. In addition, Wang’s decision to locate its headquarters in Lowell seemed the harbinger of a high-tech future for the city.

Residents of the suburban and more rural communities in the region were concerned about the impacts of growth since the 1950s, particularly rising taxes to pay for services. Long-time community members as well as newer residents preferred a small town or semi-rural community character, with substantial open space, and believed that unplanned development was jeopardizing the quality of life they had either grown up with or had deliberately chosen.

In Billerica they were worried about traffic congestion, water supply, and waste disposal.

In Chelmsford, pro-growth and anti-growth factions had already formed.

Tewksbury’s rapid residential and commercial growth had overwhelmed the town’s rural past and residents were concerned about lack of sewerage and other environmental impacts of growth.

The cost of providing services in Dracut was going up with new residential development, but there was insufficient business and industrial growth to offset residential tax increases.

Pepperell residents likewise felt that their town was on the road to suburbanization and that the service demands of residential growth were putting a heavy burden on taxpayers, especially since there was no new commercial and industrial development,

Agriculture had almost entirely disappeared from Tyngsborough and the town was becoming a residential suburb with substantial recreational uses and very limited business development.

According to the 1978 Development Policy Plan, the region was at a crossroads:

“Many residents living in the suburban and rural communities in the region are not sanguine about the future. They feel, intuitively, that the most likely future facing their communities is a continuation of past development trends, further aggravating many of the problems they are now facing: rapid residential growth, increased taxes, escalating demands for services, increasing housing costs, degradation of environmental quality and waste disposal problems, and a transition in their overall community character from rural or suburban into something less desirable.”¹

At the same time, they acknowledged that the positive attributes of their towns included general community character; good school systems; good natural and cultural environments; and good highway access. The 1978 policy plan identified two overall goals to mitigate the undesirable impacts of development up to that point:

A “shift from traditional, uniform low density sprawl to more concentrated development patterns”

The “revitalization of the City of Lowell so that it will become a true focal point of activities in the Northern Middlesex Area and Eastern Massachusetts Region.”²

Specific objectives related to those overall goals included preservation of community character, open space, historic resources, and agricultural land; minimizing the environmental impacts of growth; promotion of growth patterns that foster the development and use of public transportation; enhancement of access from Lowell to other employment centers; and provision of a wider choice of housing in cost, type, and location. Recommendations for particular communities included the hiring of professional planning staff, zoning reform to provide flexible subdivision site planning options such as cluster development and Planned Unit Development, agricultural land preservation, extension of public sewerage, and open space preservation.

Although the Northern Middlesex communities shared many common concerns in the 1970s, they were cautious about regional solutions that could be construed as infringing on local control. They feared unfunded state mandates or statewide zoning. However, intermunicipal cooperation was welcomed to solve specific problems such as transportation, solid waste, water storage, and septic disposal.

Trends in the 1980s and 1990s

Over the course of the last twenty years, many communities in our region followed a number of the recommendations in the plans of the 1970s — on a local basis. They hired planners, invested in extending the sewer system, enacted residential cluster zoning by-laws, prepared master plans and open space plans, and tried to balance growth with the need for tax revenues and the importance of environmental preservation. For the average person in the 1970s, the most worrisome impact of growth was a rising real estate tax bill. The enactment of Proposition 2-1/2 in 1981 promised local empowerment and control over tax rates, but it did not really address the growth issues underlying the rise in taxes. Municipal managers were increasingly pressed to provide services on a reduced budget.

¹ NMAC, *Development Policies for the Northern Middlesex Area*, Lowell, 1978, p. 78.

² *Ibid.*, p. 131.

As a result, they began to compete with one another to attract the non-residential development that typically provides more in taxes than it costs in services.

The relatively sluggish economy of the 1970s moderated the high growth expansion of the 1960s, but real estate development took off again in the 1980s as suburbanization moved more definitively into Westford, Dracut, Tyngsborough and Pepperell. Although Lowell revitalization efforts had important successes in the 1970s and 1980s, the residential and business suburbanization of the Northern Middlesex region continued apace in the 1980s.

During the recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s, thousands of jobs evaporated in the region, banks failed, commercial real estate vacancies soared, and residential development slowed to a crawl. Unemployment went from a low of 2.8 percent in May of 1988 to 10.7 percent in June of 1992. The NMCOG 1994 Strategic Economic Development Plan for the Northern Middlesex Region identified several transportation corridors, based on existing non-residential development, as suitable for new commercial and industrial development: Route 3, particularly at Route 129, Concord Road, the Drum Hill Rotary, and Route 113; Route 110 in Chelmsford and Westford; Route 3A in Tyngsborough at the New Hampshire line; Route 133 in Tewksbury at the Andover town line.

The Plan also promoted the desirability of adaptive reuse and redevelopment in the City of Lowell, especially on vacant industrial land. Although land zoned for non-residential uses is also available in Dracut and Pepperell, these towns were not highlighted in the 1994 plan as focus areas for economic development. The town of Dunstable has chosen not to seek industrial and commercial development.

Despite the evident hardships that this recessionary shock created in the region's communities, it also created a breathing space in the relentless suburbanization process which has been the long-term profile of the region since World War II. The economic recovery, which was established by 1995, has once again fueled the expansion of residential and business development in the towns, while the recovery in Lowell has proceeded at a slower pace. The implications of corridor development of the type recommended in the 1994 economic plan, which is occurring, may be appropriate for reevaluation in a growth management context.

The concerns about traffic, diminished open space, loss of community character, increasing housing costs, and the high cost of services expressed by the towns in the 1970s can still be heard in the region today. Despite the success of the historical parks and the heightened profile of Lowell, the city still struggles to provide good-paying jobs for an increasingly diverse population. Development expansion since the regional development policy plans of the 1970s has followed the rhythms of the economy in eastern Massachusetts. Communities have found it difficult to balance the need for tax revenues with planned development and environmental protection. Local growth management efforts have had limited effects.

Looking to the 21st century — Smart Growth

As our region becomes more uniformly developed, it is more urgent to make conscious decisions about the location and shape of development in the coming decades. This is the role of growth management. Both locally and on the regional level, thoughtful growth management can successfully integrate economic development with the preservation of environmental resources and community character.

As we enter the 21st century, it is time to evaluate the changes that transformed our region in the last half-century and make decisions about what kind of place we want to become in the next century. Are there threatened resources that we must act to preserve? Can we sustain our quality of life and accommodate growth? Can we revitalize older buildings and neighborhoods? How can we assure that all

2020 Vision: Planning for Growth in the Northern Middlesex Region

our citizens participate in both the preservation of quality of life and new economic opportunities? Local decision-making is a jealously-guarded prerogative in Massachusetts. Communities can guide their development based on their intimate knowledge of local needs and conditions. At the same time, there are many pressures on local communities that are regional in scope. We need to find the proper balance between the local and regional perspectives in order to enhance the quality of life of everyone in our region.

The experience of the last quarter-century has shown that the forces promoting urban sprawl, homogeneous development and city-suburb divisions are hard to manage on the municipal level alone. What kind of place do we want the Northern Middlesex region to be in the year 2020? What are the goals we can agree on? How can we work together to attain these goals? This was the purpose of the 2020 Vision Charrette.