

V. WHY DO WE NEED A REGIONAL GROWTH MANAGEMENT PLAN?

A regional growth management plan, accompanied with policy commitments from local governments, can help make both economic development and environmental protection more successful and effective. The economic and environmental systems that affect land use, economic prosperity, and quality of life do not stop at municipal borders.

- Transportation systems, watersheds, wildlife habitat, real estate and labor markets, and business location decisions are not circumscribed by town boundaries.
- Growth limits in one town can simply deflect growth to other communities, expanding low-density sprawl even farther away from metropolitan centers.
- Municipalities compete with one another for businesses to expand the tax base, often without consideration of affordable housing.
- Open space preservation takes place on a piecemeal basis, without attention to the creation of ecologically integrated networks.

The suburbanization of much of Northern Middlesex means that farmland and forests are becoming scarcer. Roads are increasingly lined with commercial and business development. Residents spend more and more time in the car between home, work, school, children's activities, shopping, and leisure trips. Socio-economic differences between the towns and the City of Lowell are becoming more pronounced.

Land Use and Regional Planning

In Massachusetts, primary responsibility for land use decisions rests with local municipal governments. Most regional planning agencies, including the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments (NMCOG), have no regulatory role and perform services on contract to member municipalities and the state and federal governments. Their most prominent role is as Metropolitan Planning Organizations, charged with transportation planning by federal and state agencies. The regional planning agencies collect and analyze data, project trends, and make nonbinding recommendations to member municipalities.

Regional planning agencies can assist municipalities in understanding the regional implications of development options, provide technical assistance, and help negotiate intermunicipal agreements. Our economic and environmental networks extend beyond municipal boundaries. Activities and regulations in one municipality can profoundly affect what happens in neighboring towns or cities.

A bill has been filed in the state legislature, "The Massachusetts Sustainable Development Act," which would promote coordinated land use planning on the state, regional, and local level. The bill includes provisions for financial and technical assistance to local governments that wish to participate in comprehensive planning coordinated with state and regional plans. The coordination process would consist in reviews of completeness and consistency of plans developed at the local, regional, and state levels.

What can a Regional Growth Management Plan do for Northern Middlesex?

- Identify inter-municipal development impacts
- Provide a forum for frank exchanges among the different interests in the region

2020 Vision: Planning for Growth in the Northern Middlesex Region

- Identify priority issues
- Provide a forum for regional goal setting
- Reveal opportunities for inter-municipal cooperation
- Identify benchmarks and indicators for a regular evaluation of regional growth management
- Enhance community understanding of trade-off dilemmas

Many of the important decisions facing the region about land use, transportation, environmental protection, open space and agricultural preservation, housing, and economic development transcend municipal boundaries or have regional impacts. By envisioning the mature development future of the region, setting guidelines for both development and preservation, and encouraging local adoption and inter-municipal cooperation, our communities can decide how to balance economic development, environmental preservation, and a high quality of life.