

VII. A REGIONAL VISION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Participants in the 2020 Vision Charrette identified the strengths and weaknesses of the Northern Middlesex region and discussed their goals and vision for the region in the next twenty years.

REGIONAL STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Strengths

Sense of community at the neighborhood and town level

Diversity of community types and resources -- cultural, and recreational -- within the region

Excellent educational and health care resources and opportunities

Historic roots

Diversity of population, businesses, and jobs

Regional location and access to Boston, the mountains, the ocean

Weaknesses

Low level of regional consciousness and identification

Poor communication among local governments and among local, state, and federal governments

Traffic congestion and limitations on public transportation

Urban economic development needs

Unequal distribution of affordable housing

Proximity to New Hampshire (traffic demands/ retail competition); location outside Route 128

GOALS

- More and more effective master planning by local communities
- More and better cluster residential development
- More service sharing by municipalities
- A regional land trust to preserve open space
- More affordable housing throughout the region
- Better transportation, circulation, and access within the region
- Closing of income gaps among local communities and populations
- Enhancement of the environmental and recreational qualities of regional rivers
- Maintenance of community character while accommodating development
- Improved design standards for new development
- Improved management and maintenance of land and water resources, both for human uses and wildlife habitat

2020 VISION

In 2020 the Northern Middlesex Region in 2020 will have the following characteristics:

- It will retain a diversity of community types, with a balance of urban, suburban, and predominantly rural communities.
- It will have an open space system linked into a network by the region's rivers and streams and by regional pedestrian and bike trails built on old rail and canal routes.
- Commercial and industrial development will be focused in areas already served by infrastructure.
- Residential development will be clustered in order to conserve open space.
- Mixed-use development will be the norm, with residential, commercial, institutional and industrial development located in proximity to one another in order to lessen the need for multiple vehicle trips to accomplish daily tasks.
- Local governments will collaborate even more than at present in sharing information about development trends and in sharing services.
- Transportation improvements, such as enhanced bridge crossings, will make intra-regional travel less congested.

Building Regional Consciousness

Among the weaknesses identified by the charrette participants was a generally weak sense of identification with a region. There is a strong sense of community at the neighborhood and municipal level, and people identify with the state of Massachusetts at a larger scale. Regional identity is more fluid and has been changing over the last generation with the suburbanizing trends and the creation of the eastern Massachusetts and Boston megalopolis. The boundaries of regional districts, including regional planning agencies, do not have the same resonance for many people.

The regional idea, however, is increasingly important as communities attempt to deal with issues that go beyond municipal boundaries, yet do not require state-wide attention. State and federal funding sources are increasingly giving priority to intermunicipal and regional projects in the areas of open space preservation, environmental management, transportation enhancements, and other improvements.

Several ideas emerged from the charrette to promote regional consciousness. Many of these ideas revolve around programs to disseminate ideas and organize activities that convey information about the importance of regional links and a shared regional destiny.

- Promote growth management as both a preservation policy and an economic development policy
- Implement and publicize the proposed Northern Middlesex Indicators Project - an annual report on progress towards the 2020 Vision
- Make an annual NMCOG presentation at town meetings and to the Lowell City Council in order to demonstrate how each municipality is connected to regional initiatives

2020 Vision: Planning for Growth in the Northern Middlesex Region

- Promote the signing of Memoranda of Agreement by town governments on growth management policy guidelines and regional planning projects
- Integrate watershed initiative projects and programs with regional plans