

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Spending too much time in the car driving from home to work to school to children's activities to shopping...? Does it seem like too many houses and businesses are being built on the open space that remains in your community? Or maybe you wonder — why do old industrial sites sit abandoned or underused year after year — while new factories and office parks pop up near interstates on former farmland?

Many of the issues that affect our quality of life in the Northern Middlesex area are regional in character or have regional impacts. Transportation investment decisions affect the location of new development and levels of traffic congestion. The loss of open space destroys the habitat networks wildlife need to survive. Decisions that may seem purely local, such as zoning patterns, can in fact have impacts far beyond local borders.

The 2020 Vision Charrette

In early 1999, the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments (NMCOG) invited members of the Northern Middlesex community — a diverse group of town and city officials, residents, business people, institutional and nonprofit organization representatives — to participate in a two-stage “charrette” or planning workshop in order to develop a strategy and plan for managing regional growth during the next twenty years. NMCOG staff prepared a briefing booklet to inform participants on trends in the region and growth management tools available.

At the first session, over fifty representatives from every municipality and a variety of regional organizations discussed strengths and weaknesses, current issues, and future possibilities in five thematic areas: Economic Development; Environmental Protection and Open Space; Infrastructure; Housing and Residential Development; and Community Character - History, Culture, and Landscape. Based on the results of this session, NMCOG staff developed a vision statement, a questionnaire on priority issues, and a preliminary action agenda for discussion during the second charrette session. At that gathering, participants exchanged views from the varying perspectives of urban, suburban, and rural communities.

This report documents the results of the 2020 Vision Charrette.

The 2020 Vision

Charrette participants' vision for our region in the next 20 years is one of diversity, environmental and economic balance, and greater regional cooperation:

- The region will retain a balance of urban, suburban and rural areas, each with its own character based in history, environment, and current uses.
- New economic development projects will be focused in areas already served by infrastructure.
- New residential development will be moderate and sited to preserve open space through clustering and other techniques.
- Mixed-use development will lessen the need for multiple vehicle trips to accomplish daily tasks and thereby improve traffic conditions.
- The region will have an interconnected open space network linked by waterways and regional pedestrian and bike routes.
- Improved management and maintenance of land and water resources will preserve wildlife habitat, water quality and quantity, and enhance quality of life.

The Plan

The 2020 Vision Plan is both ambitious and pragmatic. There are no easy tasks in truly regional growth management, and there are often difficult choices and trade-offs to be made. The easier tasks, such as open space and historic preservation, are based on a theoretical consensus, but even then, specific situations can be highly controversial. These are the regional growth management challenges and tasks that emerged from the charrette discussions:

The Hard Tasks

- Preserve open space and develop an interconnected open space network
- 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 that include residences
- Promote a more equitable distribution of affordable housing in the region

The potential projects that garnered the most widespread support from charrette participants included development of a regional open space plan, dissemination of model zoning bylaws on cluster development and mixed-use development, transportation planning for mixed-used centers, dissemination of design guidelines for town centers, and creation of an alliance of local land trusts.

Next Steps

The 2020 Vision Plan will be NMCOG's baseline plan for many years to come. NMCOG will use this plan to measure progress towards the 2020 Vision. An annual Northern Middlesex Indicators report will publicize the state of the region in relation to the plan goals. NMCOG will encourage municipalities to sign memoranda of agreement on a handful of issues with broadest appeal. The memoranda will contain specific mechanisms for inter-municipal consultation. Finally, NMCOG will use this plan in developing new programs to assist member communities in coping with growth management dilemmas.