8. LAND USE

Purpose: The Land Use chapter serves as the practical guide for community development. Land use controls in the form of Zoning Ordinances and a Planning Board's Site Plan or Subdivision Regulations guide development in a community based on the recommendations of the Master Plan. The purpose of this Land Use chapter is to synthesize the elements of the other chapters relevant to land use into a clear set of recommendations for communities to consider in the zoning and regulatory framework, in addition to a few other strategies such a studies, data collection, and land conservation.



IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS

The 2015 Regional Plan did not have a Land Use Chapter specifically, but included land use within the Existing Conditions, Appendix A section. The Appendix considered public input, as well as data sets from various sources. The list of recommendations included:

- ☑ Align local zoning ordinances with local master plan goals in terms of balancing rural, traditional land use patterns with development and economic opportunity in the region.
- ☑ There is a continuing, intrinsic challenge to managing growth and development within the region while protecting and maintaining farmland, environmentally sensitive areas, and important ecosystems.
- ☑ The region and its communities need to find the appropriate balance between development and maintaining rural, historic, and traditional land use patterns, which is a common goal across local master plans.
- ☑ There is a need to facilitate effective management and maintenance of open space lands, particularly those that are accessible to the public.

While high level, the recommendations are all still relevant and speak to a balance among development, community character, and quality of life which are consistent with the overall 2026 Regional Plan purpose.

KEY CHANGES SINCE 2015

Since 2015, several communities have sought to implement economic development tools, such as NH RSA 79-E and Economic Revitalization Zones and Tax Increment Financing Districts, contributing to the business-friendly nature of the region. The region is growing but also skewing more towards older populations. Part of this change can be seen in declining public school enrollment trends throughout the region. Changing demographics may indicate a need for different services in the future. Housing affordability has become a larger issue for homebuyers and renters as median house sale price continues to outpace median household income. This trend has led to increased interest in Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) and other smaller housing types that can be more affordable; young and longtime residents looking to downsize may also seek out these housing types as they look outside of traditional single-family homes to meet their needs.

Traffic volumes in the region are flat or growing slowly after their rebound from the COVID-19 Pandemic. Revenue for transportation infrastructure is flat or declining, while costs for transportation infrastructure continue to rise resulting in less infrastructure built each year. While traffic volumes have largely rebounded from the pandemic, commuting patterns remain affected as the percentage of remote workers in the region more than doubled from 2019 to 2024. Electric vehicles continue to increase in market share across the State – keeping up with this trend through the development of charging infrastructure will be a priority as this transition continues. Community Power Aggregation has become available in almost all Central NH communities, either individually or as part of the opt-in program through Merrimack County.

Many communities define themselves by their small-town character, open space, and proximity to natural resources. A significant proportion of the region continues to be put under active conservation or current use, and recreational resources have continued to expand as a result. Higher temperatures and milder winters have led to an increased spread of pathogens and invasive species that impact natural areas and wildlife, closing down local water bodies due to cyanobacteria or affecting forests that become infested with the hemlock woolly adelgid. Water quality and water infrastructure has risen as a major issue due to the discovery of contaminants in private wells, PFAS, and runoff from salt and fertilizer – all of which need to be regularly monitored and addressed.

COMMUNITY INPUT

In the summer and fall of 2026, a survey was conducted across the region, asking about various topics, including land use. Residents were asked to identify areas throughout the Central NH Region where they would encourage or discourage development. Locations where residents encouraged development were areas that already have development but could be made into village cores or used to fulfill a community need like housing or small businesses. Salisbury Heights, Suncook Village, Loudon Village, and Contoocook Village were all encouraged by residents to develop their village cores. Bow Mills and Commercial Street in Boscawen were also encouraged by residents to be developed into smaller village cores for their respective towns. Downtown Concord was also a significant hub of encouraged development, particularly to draw young people into the region; residents suggested building out a "rail yard arts district" to bolster the creative economy, as well as an increase in state educational buildings such as a UNH - Concord satellite. Residents also suggested housing to support low-income and vulnerable populations, in addition to restaurants and other services to accommodate workers in the area. One resident supported building out areas surrounding the Concord Airport in conjunction with affordable housing.

Locations where residents discouraged development were largely undeveloped, natural areas. Residents identified locations in Warner, Boscawen, and Webster to be preserved either due to being forested or to protect

existing farmland. Multiple residents emphasized the importance of discouraging development in areas surrounding Bear Brook State Park to create a "green buffer". Some comments from residents who discouraged development in areas also noted that where development does occur, significant efforts should be made to limit sprawl and encourage smaller, more low-impact developments.

CNHRPC Asked: Where do you want to encourage development or discourage development in the Central NH Region?

"If development must occur, we need to prevent suburban sprawl that lets the identity of a town fade."

"We could build a lot of affordable housing and a big new neighborhood on that part of Concord if we developed the [Concord] airport."

"Commercial Street in Boscawen near Hannah Dustin should include a tiny village-core / micro-district of housing, commercial retail and mixed-use development."

"An 'artist district' in the South End of Concord would be full of dense worker housing geared towards artists, musicians, and the creative economy / young people in general."

"Discourage anywhere around Bear Brook State Park to continue building a green buffer."

"If developments must occur ensure we allow ecovillages, tiny houses, yurts, and other low impacts developments."



FACTS TODAY

A full assessment of the Facts Today and other trends can be found in each chapter of this Regional Plan. A few key highlights are discussed below.

Building Permits

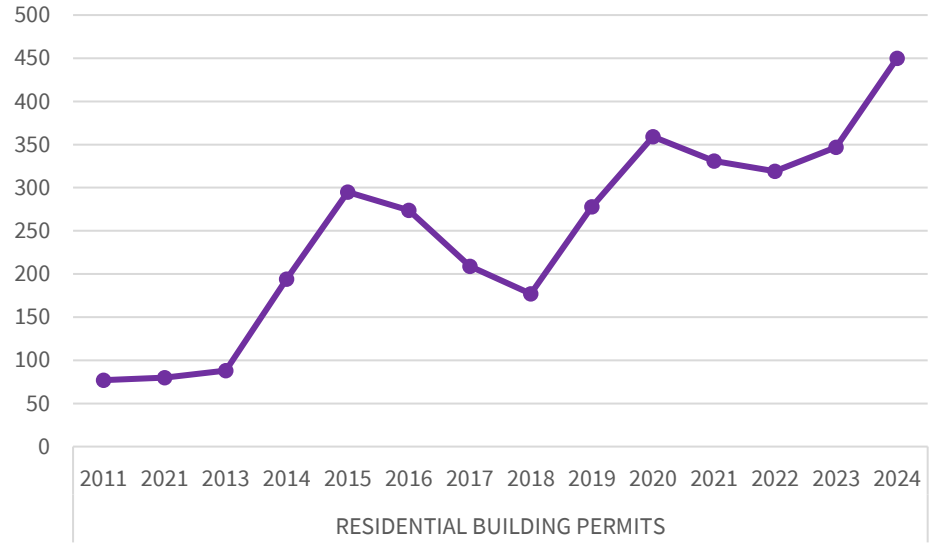
Between 2011 and 2024, building permit numbers, as reported by the NH Department of Business and Economic Affairs, show that residential development has varied by year, though overall, the numbers have increased.

Table 8.1 Residential Building Permits by Central NH Community

Community	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Allenstown	4	2	-3	2	8	10	6	8	7	49	11	4	0	7
Boscawen	1	0	2	6	-1	50	6	1	6	8	12	18	10	19
Bow	5	19	16	25	16	27	23	17	20	13	21	8	11	14
Bradford	1	5	4	3	5	2	2	3	5	11	5	6	3	4
Canterbury	3	0	4	4	2	5	5	6	8	13	9	8	4	10
Chichester	0	3	5	9	3	3	7	10	3	9	14	5	17	4
Concord	15	-3	-9	71	169	79	34	46	85	56	134	110	137	147
Deering	2	1	-2	1	2	2	3	6	1	3	5	8	3	0
Dunbarton	5	2	6	10	4	8	22	11	12	13	10	20	28	23
Epsom	15	12	14	13	18	13	11	3	38	12	6	10	13	44
Henniker	3	1	4	1	4	5	25	9	14	14	4	12	10	10
Hillsborough	-2	2	1	0	12	6	0	6	8	10	-1	17	13	18
Hopkinton	4	3	13	4	10	11	10	19	13	13	17	15	21	3
Loudon	5	12	22	22	24	38	30	16	23	24	19	8	10	19
Pembroke	1	6	2	10	1	5	-2	1	1	55	5	20	20	87
Pittsfield	2	1	2	1	3	-1	3	1	10	14	18	15	16	17
Salisbury	4	2	2	3	4	2	6	2	7	8	12	16	8	8
Sutton	2	5	3	3	3	4	8	5	4	7	13	11	16	6
Warner	5	8	2	4	5	3	4	4	9	17	10	4	3	8
Webster	2	-1	0	2	3	2	6	3	4	10	7	4	4	2
CNHRPC	77	80	88	194	295	274	209	177	278	359	331	319	347	450

Source: NH Department of Business and Economic Affairs

Figure 8.1 Residential Building Permits – Central NH Region 2011-2024



Zoning Ordinances

Zoning in New Hampshire focuses on where certain uses and densities are permitted as well as protections for natural resource features like wetlands and shorelands. Zoning ordinances are developed and passed by each municipality, and while they may share certain features (lot sizes, frontages, permitted uses, prohibited uses, wetland setbacks, etc.) they are unique to each municipality, and may – or may not – have commonality with neighboring communities.

Every community in the Central NH region has zoning ordinances in place, each including a wide variety of provisions. **Map 8.1 Zoning** depicts a generalized map of zoning districts across the Central NH region. Ordinances address lot sizes and permitted uses, wetland and surface water, provisions, as well as a variety of innovative land use controls. Cluster or conservation subdivision ordinances, workforce housing ordinances, Planned Unit Development ordinances, infill development ordinances, and accessory dwelling unit provisions are found all across the region. Other required ordinances such as telecommunication ordinances and floodplain development ordinances can be found in every community. On an annual basis communities consider revisions at Town Meeting, while Concord considers changes as needed with its City Council. Though they are all different, every zoning ordinance reflects local priorities and an effort to implement a community's master plan.

Zoning ordinances are living documents, and as such, should be seen as needing to evolve with changing trends in the economy and demographics, as well as construction and engineering standards. Housing challenges and economic development are the primary focuses for zoning amendments, but emerging global technology and economic factors should be considered as well. For example, data centers have been a major focus of local land use control across the country, and Central NH communities should take steps to be ready to address such issues.

Changes in State Law

Although zoning ordinances are developed, approved, and applied locally within a specific community, New Hampshire state law controls what can, cannot, and shall be done within a zoning ordinance. Over the past few

legislative sessions, there have been numerous changes at the state level that directly speak to zoning ordinances. One of the first changes was regarding the regulation of accessory dwelling units (ADUs). ADUs now, by state law, must be allowed in any zoning district that allows single family homes. Additionally, they must be permitted by a building permit only, and may be attached or detached. Another change is that multifamily developments (apartments) must be allowed in any commercial zone with "adequate infrastructure." Other notable changes in state law over recent years include:

- Dual participation in Zoning and Planning Boards.
- Charter school status as a governmental use of land.
- Optional flood resilience section in municipal master plans.
- Childcare centers in commercial zones.
- Building on Class VI (municipal owned but not maintained) roads.
- Development on dead-end roads.
- State building code.
- Impact fee provisions.
- Vesting (a.k.a. grandfathering).
- Third party inspections.
- Residential parking requirements.
- Allowing manufactured homes and the reasonable and realistic expansion of manufactured home parks.
- Appeals.
- Landfills as automatic developments of regional impact.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As the region moves into the next decade, there are several challenges to content with, but also some opportunities to enhance the region's suitability. Finding ways to address these challenges with balance and community feedback will enable Central NH communities to adapt to changing situations with better options for land use.

Challenges

- The region's housing stock needs more units to bridge the current housing deficit and keep pace with anticipated demand.

- The housing stock will also need to be diversified in terms of the type of housing available (ADUs, rental units, first-floor units for seniors, etc.). A diverse housing stock that responds to changing demographics could lower costs through better alignment with the market.

- Efforts to lower the cost of housing are also needed. Rising home and rental costs are a notable challenge throughout the state and in the Central NH region.

- State road and bridge maintenance needs to be addressed. Current spending levels programmed into the most recent NH DOT Ten Year Plan will result in a decline of road conditions over the next 10 years and may increase the number of red listed bridges.

- The need for ride services continues to grow. On-demand transportation services for critical trips such as medical appointments and groceries continue to grow as our population ages.

- Transportation costs are rising fast. With traffic volumes and revenue flat or declining, less infrastructure gets built each year. NH DOT construction costs have grown nearly 120% over the last ten years.

- Infrastructure costs are rising (sewer, water, etc.), making it difficult to address housing and economic development needs.

- Monitoring and improving water quality is often a challenge. Water quality remains a significant issue throughout the region. Cyanobacteria in ponds and lakes, contaminants in private wells, PFAS, and runoff from salt and fertilizer all remain threats to water quality that need to be regularly monitored and addressed.

- Managing invasive species can be a constant threat. Warmer temperatures allow for the increased spread of pathogens and invasive plants, including hemlock woolly adelgid and emerald ash borer, variable milfoil, Japanese knotweed, and more. All of which can be detrimental to ecosystem health, and damage natural areas, if not reported and addressed.

- Planning for open space through coordinated development zoning is needed. As communities address housing affordability and economic development, planning with natural resources in mind through zoning can help to preserve open space and maintain the region's neighborhood and rural character.

- The need to balance community character (rural, historic, agricultural) in the face of development pressures and needs has been noted throughout the public engagement process, as well as the previous regional plan.

- More renewable energy sources could offset costs and reliability issues associated with the grid. Consider promotion of solar, wind, and hydroelectric alternatives to enable consumers to make a choice for electric services. Install municipal solar arrays for long term gain.
- More attention on water and sewer projects is needed. Consider drinking water as a precious resource and further protect its quality and quantity. Invest in water and sewer projects to enhance communities and attract appropriate development.

- What does declining school enrollment mean? Consider options for local schools, and opening community-wide dialogues about goals.

- The potential for large data center sites in the Central NH is credible. Aspects like noise, electrical grid impacts, and water quality have been focal points of data centers and represent issues associated with economic and technological advancements. Developing a zoning and/or regulatory framework to address these issues would serve communities well.

Challenges can be found across all of the chapters and topics. Housing costs and stock are a challenge, as is the need to balance growth with the protection of community character. Infrastructure costs tend to limit the ability for development of all kinds, including economic development. Finally, changing demographics transform the face of community facility needs.

Opportunities

- Infill and reuse zoning can protect open spaces and community character (village, historic, and rural), while limiting infrastructure costs and long-term tax burdens. Reusing existing larger, older homes, including farmhouses, for multi-family while protecting facades and historic elements and increasing density in already dense areas (such as villages) are two such opportunities for balanced development. Minimal needs to expand infrastructure, including roads, will help limit development costs.

- Cluster housing is an opportunity to address housing variety and development costs while protecting community character and natural resources. A cluster ordinance will allow for greater density in a development that is off set with open space. Density incentives are typically included for more desirable housing or innovative open space elements. Both clustering and density incentives present an opportunity to protect open space (including recreational areas, historic sites, agriculture, and forests), foster the development of desired housing types (for example, requiring a percentage of homes that are ranches would address affordability and first-floor living), and limit infrastructure costs (a cluster development often results in short roads than a conventional subdivision). Finally, clustering can balance natural resource protection while providing housing.

- Planning Board regulations (site plan and subdivision) can encourage or require trail development and connections with open space for development projects.

- Developments can be required to provide off-site improvements, such as sewer, water, and roads. Maximizing the ability to share infrastructure costs with developers can help to alleviate costs while providing needed infrastructure.

- More communities could take advantage of tools such as adopting TIF districts and creating tax incentives zones. Often, this can be coordinating with a developer agreement wherein the private development entity shares costs with the municipality, which can make infrastructure development less expensive.

- Communities could develop strategies that use the SWOT analysis found in the Central / Southern Region of New Hampshire Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) by ensuring that the community's strengths are consistent with the region's and that they offer "solutions" to weaknesses in the region. Lastly, strategies should be developed to capitalize on regional opportunities.

Despite the challenges, there are also several opportunities. At the most basic level, opportunities exist in the form of looking at the challenges together, as opposed to individually. Housing and economic development can be coordinated with natural resource protection. Funds can be generated through TIF districts and with developer off-site improvements. Lastly, community facilities, notably schools, can be addressed through thinking creatively about where and how they are constructed – and how future development can not only drive the need, but their construction as well. Balance and coordination are the primary opportunity.

TOOLS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Each chapter of this Regional Plan has numerous helpful tools relative to their core topic areas. Although a few overlapping **Housing Tools** are noted, from this Land Use Chapter emerge additional **Land Use Tools**. See also the Community Facilities Chapter, Transportation Chapter, and Economic Development Chapter for further reference.

- **Cluster Development Tool Sheet:** A cluster development, also known as a cluster subdivision or conservation subdivision, seeks to allow for homes on smaller lots than would otherwise be permitted in exchange for permanently preserved open space. Density incentives can be provided for various types of desirable open space or for housing preferences such as senior housing or workforce housing. This tool can address balanced growth with natural resource preservation.
- **(Adaptive) Historic Structure Reuse Tool Sheet:** Provides guidance for converting existing historic, large homes and farmhouses into multi-family structures. Reusing these structures can work with existing density, thus protecting natural resources, as well as supporting historic preservation. Lastly, they can also limit the need for new infrastructure which can keep costs down.
- **Tax Increment Financing Districts Tool Sheet (Economic Development):** Seeks to fund infrastructure within a defined district with funds generated from new development within that district. This tool can help fund necessary infrastructure to allow for balanced development.
- **Buildout Analysis:** A buildout analysis can assess how the current zoning framework "builds out" over time. This can help policy makers assess whether or not the current zoning framework needs to be revised or changed to meet the community's needs.
- **Master Plan Update:** State statute requires that a community's master plan be updated every ten years. Secondly, it provides the policy basis for the development of the Zoning Ordinance. For example, rural character may be expressed as an objective in a Master Plan, and the zoning ordinance may implement this though cluster zoning ordinances or an ordinance that protects agricultural lands.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE REGION THROUGH 2040

- [ ] **Encourage ordinances that allow for reuse or rehabilitation of larger, older, historic properties into multi-family or condominium developments.** Reusing these structures can provide housing at more affordable rates and limit the need for additional infrastructure.

- [ ] **Maximize the utility of cluster-type ordinances, including Planned Unit Developments, Cluster Subdivisions, and Cottage Housing.** Clustering housing can lead to economies of scale to keep costs down, and mixing in various housing types and commercial uses can create sense of community in a neighborhood. Lastly, the act of clustering can protect land and natural resources.

- [ ] **Continue to implement many of the recommendations from the previous regional plan.** The trends that led to these recommendations still exist, and the intervening pandemic and inflation rates have delayed much of their implementation. Continuing to pursue these recommendations will support this regional plan as well.

- [ ] **Continue to monitor and respond to changes in the state's legislative framework.** The flurry of new state laws over the past three years has led to many changes at the local level. As housing affordability challenges continue to plague the state, additional changes can be expected.

- [ ] **Limit the costs to communities to expand infrastructure and minimize tax impacts into the future.** TIF Districts, infill, reuse, and developer-funded improvements can help to minimize future municipal costs for infrastructure expansion.

- [ ] **Participate in CNHRPC traffic counts.** The CNHRPC traffic count program is an essential tool for transportation planning at the local level and should be an annual priority.

- [ ] **Consider transportation corridor studies.** Transportation corridor studies can shed light on challenges but also identify solutions for local traffic concerns. Engaging in these study efforts is encouraged.

- [ ] **Adopt Economic Development Committees.** Economic Development Committees are vital to steering the economic development of a community. Ensuring they are in place and engaged is an essential tool for focused economic development.

- [ ] **Ensure Community Master Plans are current and up to date.** A master plan provides the basis for a community's zoning ordinance, but more importantly, it defines where a community is, and where it wants to go over the next ten years. Updating these plans are a vital process for shaping community growth and development.

- [ ] **Consider using a land use build out analysis to test the current zoning framework.** A buildout analysis is an excellent way to see how a community's zoning ordinance impacts the community if all lots are built out. Engaging in such studies on a periodic basis is a useful tool when updating master plans or considering zoning changes.

- ☐ **Consider zoning ordinances to protect natural resources.** Natural resource protection can serve many purposes, and considering zoning ordinances that achieve these goals can be a crucial tool.

- ☐ **Protect natural resources through the preservation of land and conservation easements.** Land conservation is the best way to preserve land as open space. Finding willing landowners and funds to do so can directly contribute to conservation efforts.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information on land use related data and resources, please see the following:

NH Office of Planning and Development (NH OPD) Annual Survey of Regulations and Ordinances

https://www.nheconomy.com/office-of-planning-and-development/what-we-do/municipal-and-regional-planning-assistance/municipal-land-use-regulation-annual-survey

NH Municipal Association (NHMA)

https://www.nhmunicipal.org/

NH Housing Toolbox

https://nhhousingtoolbox.org/

NH Department of Business and Economic Affairs

https://www.nheconomy.com/about-us/

UNH Cooperative Extension

https://extension.unh.edu/

CNHRPC Traffic Data Collection Program and Reports

https://cnhrpc.org/gis-data/traffic-count-data/