STRAFFORD
Regional Planning Commission

Meeting of the Strafford RPC Commissioners

Friday, November 20, 2026 9:00 – 10:30 AM. Hybrid Meeting (**Conference Rm 1A, 150 Wakefield Street, Rochester)** and via Teams)

In accordance with RSA 91:A, the Commission requires an in-person quorum. So long as an in-person quorum, Commissioners may participate virtually. Guests may attend the meeting virtually or at the SRPC Office. All participants, both in-person and virtual, can communicate contemporaneously.

Microsoft Teams Meeting
Join: https://teams.microsoft.com/meet/26158346669748?p=4xytesfYGFhcig30qO
Meeting ID: 261 583 466 697 48
Passcode: fH7Va7Ph

These instructions have also been provided at www.straffordrpcnh.gov. If anybody is unable to access the meeting, please email mtaylorfetter@straffordrpcnh.gov or call 603-994-3500 (x115).

Agenda Item	Time	Pre-Meeting Notes
1) **Introductions**	9:00-9:05	
2) **Commissioner Roundtable**	9:05-9:10	Updates from your community
3) **Public Hearing** a) Hearing: Regional Plan Climate Chapter Lisa Wise, Regional Planner b) Vote to Adopt the Chapter or Continue Hearing to the December meeting	9:10-9:30	Link to draft document
4) **Action Items** a) Approval of the October 16, 2026 Minutes	9:30-9:35	See Enclosed
5) **Presentations and Discussion** a) Land Use and Environment Regional Plan Draft Chapter …… Kyle Pimental, Assistant Director b) The Regional Plan "Bridge" Executive Summary Draft Chapter…… Michael Polizzotti, Sr. Econ. Dev. Planner	9:35-10:00 10:00-10:20	Drafts of both plan chapters can be found in the meeting packet.
6) **Other Business**	10:20-10:25	
7) **Citizens Forum**	10:25-10:30	
8) **Adjourn**	10:30	

Reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities are available upon request. Include a detailed description of the accommodation you will need along with your contact info. Please make your request as early as possible; allowing at least 5 days advance notice. Last minute requests will be accepted but may be impossible to fill. Please call (603) 994-3500 or email srpc@straffordrpcnh.gov.

RULES OF PROCEDURE

Strafford Regional Planning Commission
Strafford Metropolitan Planning Organization, and
Strafford Economic Development District

Meeting Etiquette

Be present at the scheduled start of the meeting.

Be respectful of the views of others.

Ensure that only one person talks at a time. Raising your hand to be recognized by the chair or facilitator is good practice.

Do not interrupt others or start talking before someone finishes.

Do not engage in cross talk.

Avoid individual discussions in small groups during the meeting. When one person speaks, others should listen.

Active participation is encouraged from all members.

When speaking, participants should adhere to topics of discussion directly related to agenda items.

When speaking, individuals should be brief and concise when speaking.

The Strafford Regional Planning Commission & Metropolitan Planning Organization holds both public meetings and public hearings.

For public meetings, guests are welcome to observe, but should follow proper meeting etiquette allowing the meeting to proceed uninterrupted. Members of the public who wish to be involved and heard should use venues such as Citizen Forum, Public Hearings, Public Comment Periods, outreach events, seminars, workshops, listening sessions, etc.

STRAFFORD
Regional Planning Commission

DATE: October 9, 2026

TO: SRPC Commissioners

FROM: Jen Czysz, Executive Director
Kyle Pimental, Assistant Director
Lisa Wise, Regional Planner
Michael Polizzotti, Senior Economic Development Planner
Megan Taylor-Fetter, Office Coordinator

RE: October 16, 2026 Agenda Items & Upcoming Meeting Schedule

Regional Plan Climate Chapter Public Hearing

The public comment period for the draft Climate Chapter wrapped up on Tuesday, November 10th, 2026. Comments from the October commission meeting and the public comment period have been compiled in Appendix B and addressed in the final draft of the chapter. Highlights include:

- Expanding discussion of specific impacts including flood hazards from stormwater and dam failures, effects of drought on tree health and contaminants, and land conservation and habitat.
- Organizing the objectives into categories and adding a few to fill gaps.
- Updating status of the hazard mitigation plans in Table 3.
- Adding more examples, such as Lee floodplain mapping project to the case study on floodplain ordinance updates, mutual aid examples, Farmington solar project, Sunrise Lake rain gardens, etc.
- Adding mention of adult education programs in addition to the K-12 example.

View the updated draft online: https://straffordrpcnh.gov/docs/forward-thinking-regional-master-plan-climate-addendum

Regional Plan Land Use and Environment Chapter

An 80% draft of the Land Use and Environment Chapter has been included in the packet for review. Central to this chapter is the recognition that environmental protection and economic growth are interconnected, and that land use planning is essential in balancing these priorities. The chapter is structured to provide:

- An overview that highlight's the region's geographic background, existing land uses, and demographic trends
- A vision, four themes and corresponding goal statements, and the four lenses that provide overarching principles that are consistent with the CEDS and MTP

Staff will provide an overview at the meeting for Commissioner discussion. A final draft will be available on the SRPC website in advance of the December Commission meeting when we will kick off the public comment period.

Regional Plan "Bridge" Executive Summary

A draft of the "Bridge" has been compiled. The Bridge acts as the executive summary of the full regional plan, compiling the findings and priorities from the 2026-2030 CEDS (adopted), 2026-2050 MTP (adopted), Land Use and Environment chapter (pending adoption), and Climate chapter (pending adoption). The Bridge has also identified:

- A draft regional vision
- Cross-cutting themes and priorities identified from the four plan components for the region to look towards
- And overview of SRPC and the purpose of the regional plan
- A discussion of the region's geography and demographics
- An overview of the outreach and background analysis
- The priorities from each component of the regional plan

The draft is included in the meeting packet. An overview will be provided at the November Commission meeting and feedback on this draft is welcome. Like the Land Use and Environment Chapter, a complete draft will be available on the SRPC website in advance of the December Commission meeting when we will kick off the public comment period.

Draft Schedule of Upcoming Meetings

(subject to change)
Monthly Meetings: 3rd Friday of the month, 9-10:30 AM, SRPC Office, Conf. Room 1A
Quarterly Field Trips: Thursdays, 3:45-5:30 PM, in Sept., Dec., Feb., and Jun.

Date and Time	Location	Program	Tentative Agenda Items
Thur. Dec. 10, 2026 3:45-5:30 PM	Dover	MPO	COAST Facility Tour – come and learn about COAST bus operations and efforts to build a new operations center.
Fri. Dec. 18, 2026 9-10:30 AM	SRPC	RPC	• Climate Chapter continued hearing & adoption if needed • Regional Plan continued discussions • New Planning for Housing and Natural Resource Protection Tool Announcement • Join us after the meeting for a Holiday Bake Off!
Fri. Jan. 15, 2027 9-10:30 AM	SRPC	RPC	• Regional Plan (LUE & Bridge) Public Hearing and Adoption • Sunrise Lake 319 Project

STRAFFORD
Regional Planning Commission

Meeting of the Strafford RPC Commissioners & MPO Policy Committee
Friday, October 16, 2026 9:00 – 11:00 AM. Hybrid Meeting (Conference Rm 128A, Rochester Public Works Facility, 209 Chestnut Hill Road and via Teams)

1. Introductions

At 9:10 AM, Chair Paul Rasmussen called the meeting to order and asked for introductions.

Commissioners present: Paul Rasmussen, Durham; Michael Bobinsky, Somersworth; Mark Richardson, Somersworth; Michael Lehrman, Durham; Katrin Kasper, Lee; Matthew Towne, Barrington; John Mullen, Middleton, Rick Healey, Rochester; Don Manter, Northwood; Kean McDermott, Dover; Steve Brown, Dover; Sarah Wrightsman, Newmarket

Staff: Jen Czysz, Kyle Pimental, Colin Lentz, Michael Polizzotti, Lisa Wise, Megan Taylor-Fetter

Commissioners and Policy members attending on Teams: Nicholas Altonaga, NHDOT; John Roth, Brookfield

Guests attending on Teams: Michael Miller

Staff attending remotely: Lisa Murphy, Blair Haney, Rachel Dewey, Mark Davie

2. Commissioner Roundtable

S. Wrightsman announced that the Housing Opportunity Planning (HOP) Grant Program will receive the NECAPA Project of the Year award and recognized the many participating communities in the region. He noted that the award reflects the significant contributions and success of local communities and partners over the past four years.

J. Nute. Milton shared that SRPC will be attending a Milton Selectboard meeting as part of the Road Tour initiative.

A. Ross Raymond reported that Merrymeeting Lake in New Durham, which represents approximately 40% of the town's tax base, is facing a proposed 22-foot drawdown as part of a planned dam repair project by DES. She noted concerns about potential economic and environmental impacts, including effects on waterfront properties, drinking water supplies, and nearby wells. Local residents, the lake association, town officials, and legal counsel are working to address these concerns and advocate for alternatives as discussions with DES continue.

J. Boudreau shared that the City of Rochester has contracted a company to look at water-sewer rates. Their findings will be presented at the November City Council meeting.

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M. Bobinsky reported that the City of Somersworth approved a $16.9 million State Revolving Fund (SRF) loan for upgrades to the city's water treatment plant. The project will address capital replacement needs, improve system capacity and efficiency, and support regional emergency water interconnections with Dover, Berwick, Maine, and potentially Rochester. Design work is underway, with construction expected to begin following final design completion. He also noted that the project will benefit from 30% loan forgiveness through the SRF program and that the city is pursuing additional funding assistance to help offset costs.

D. Manter noted that the Northwood Planning Board has approved a proposal for a new Aroma Joe's on Route 4. The coffee shop is planned next door to the Outhouse Ale/Wilder Flooring building, located approximately 300 yards from the local elementary school. He remarked that the location will provide convenient access for motorists traveling on and off Route 4, making it an attractive stop for local coffee enthusiasts.

K. Gingue reported that the new city manager for Dover has been selected. Chris Parker will be moving up from the Deputy City Manager. Mike Joyal is going to be retiring in December. There will be a search for the Deputy City Manager.

P. Rasmussen reported that Durham now has two town planners as Michael Berhendt transitions out of his role and Maddie Harris transitions into the position. He noted that the overlap will help ensure a smooth transfer of responsibilities and continuity for ongoing planning projects.

K. Pimental reported that in Farmington a pre-construction meeting was held for the expansion of the Farmington Ridge manufactured housing community. The project will add 70 housing units and includes major infrastructure improvements, including new roads, water, sewer, and drainage systems. Construction has begun, with utility work expected to continue into next year. The project represents a significant multi-million-dollar investment and is the largest housing development in Farmington in at least a decade.

3. Continued Public Hearing

a. Hearing: Metropolitan Transportation Plan

At 9:20AM. P. Rasmussen opened the public Hearing. C. Lentz provide a brief summary of the Metropolitan Transportation Plan update. Additional comments have been compiled and incorporated into the plan. He noted that recent updates incorporated feedback on emerging transportation issues, including e-bikes, autonomous vehicles, and evolving mobility technologies. Additional revisions addressed the importance of coordinating land use and transportation planning along major corridors to help manage growth and reduce future infrastructure costs. The discussion included recent public and commissioner feedback related to emerging transportation technologies, including e-bikes and autonomous vehicles, and the need for infrastructure and policy considerations to address evolving transportation modes. Additional discussion focused on coordinating land use and transportation planning along major corridors to reduce future traffic challenges and costly infrastructure needs. Commissioners also highlighted the importance of planning for an

aging population and expanding transportation options for residents who may no longer be able to drive.

b. Vote to Adopt the MTP

K. Kasper motioned to accept the Metropolitan Transportation Plan. Seconded by M. Williams. A roll call vote was taken with all voting in favor. The motion passed. J. Wade and N. Altonaga abstained.

4. Action Items

a. Approve September 18, 2026 Minutes

K. Kaper motioned to approve the September 18, 2026 minutes as written seconded by S. Wrightsman. A roll call vote was taken with a unanimous vote in favor. S. Stancel, J. Wade, N. Altonaga, K. Gingue, abstained.

b. Accept FY2028 Municipal Dues

J. Czysz stated that we are looking for a vote to approve so that we can send out letters to municipalities in time for them to incorporate the costs into their upcoming budget development process. Dues are calculated annually using updated municipal population estimates from the New Hampshire Office of Planning and Development and adjusted for inflation based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI). The CPI increase was 3.4%. The assessment uses a tiered per-capita rate structure, with a higher rate applied to the first 5,000 residents and a reduced rate for population above that threshold. The proposed adjustment is expected to increase SRPC's overall dues revenue by approximately $6,900.

S. Wrightsman motioned to approve the FY2028 Dues as presented. K. Kasper seconded the motion. All members voted in favor by roll call vote. The motion passed.

5. Presentations

a. Regional Plan Climate Chapter - Lisa Wise, Regional Planner

L. Wise provided a presentation of the Regional Plan Climate Chapter. She stated that SRPC is soliciting comments on the Climate Addendum of the regional master plan, *Forward Thinking*. The Climate Addendum contains an overview of climate trends and projections in the Strafford Region and identifies a series of goals and objectives for the region to prepare for the impacts of a changing climate. The Climate Addendum is intended as a complement to the three other components of the *Forward Thinking* Comprehensive Plan – Economic Development, Transportation, and Land Use and Environment – providing a focused compilation and discussion of the climate-related themes and action ideas that have emerged throughout the development of the regional master plan.

The public comment period for the draft Climate Addendum begins on October 9 and will conclude on November 10, 2026. An adoption hearing is scheduled for the November 20th Commission Meeting.

Discussion of the Regional Plan Climate Chapter focused on broadening the climate conversation beyond the coastal communities that have traditionally received the most attention and funding. Commissioners noted that inland communities face different climate-related challenges, including stormwater management, road maintenance, dam safety, drought, groundwater impacts, agricultural changes, and declining lake water quality. Several members emphasized the need to address both flooding and water shortages, as prolonged drought conditions can affect drinking water supplies, wildfire risk, agriculture, private wells, and contaminant migration. Participants also highlighted the importance of framing climate adaptation projects around multiple benefits, such as emergency preparedness, infrastructure resilience, public safety, and economic impacts, rather than solely environmental outcomes. Additional comments encouraged greater attention to wildlife and ecosystem impacts, pest and tick populations, public education and engagement, mutual aid programs, and the financial challenges communities face in addressing climate-related infrastructure needs. Overall, commissioners praised the Climate Chapter and encouraged continued expansion of climate planning efforts throughout the entire region.

b. C-PACER - Sarah Brock, Clean Energy NH-

Sarah provided an overview of the C-PACER program, a financing tool that helps eligible commercial, industrial, nonprofit, multifamily, and new construction properties fund energy efficiency, renewable energy, water conservation, and resiliency improvements. The program is administered by the NH Business Finance Authority and allows long-term financing that remains with the property if ownership changes. The presentation highlighted that C-PACER is a voluntary, low-risk program for municipalities, requiring minimal administrative involvement while supporting private investment, economic development, sustainability, and property value growth.

Commissioners questioned whether communities with limited commercial development would see enough eligible projects to justify adoption. It was noted that while larger projects are more common, the low administrative burden and minimal risk make C-PACER a useful financing tool for municipalities to have available even if it is not used immediately. Additional discussion explored eligible project costs and whether engineering, surveying, architectural, permitting, and other pre-construction expenses could be included in financing. Participants noted that the cost of renewable energy, resiliency, and infrastructure improvements can add up quickly, potentially making the program viable for more projects than initially expected.

c. New EV-Charging Funding Program - Jack Wade, NHDES

Jack Wade of NHDES presented the new Recharging the Adventure NH (RANH) grant program, which provides $1 million in funding to support the installation of Level 2 electric vehicle charging stations at tourism and travel destinations across New Hampshire. Eligible applicants include municipalities, state agencies, nonprofits, and private entities. The program offers reimbursement of up to 80% of eligible project costs, with a maximum award of $100,000 per municipality and a minimum local match of 20%. Grant-funded

chargers must be publicly accessible year-round, maintained for at least five years, and located at destinations where visitors typically spend 90 minutes or more, such as downtowns, museums, parks, recreational facilities, and entertainment venues. The presentation highlighted New Hampshire's need for additional Level 2 charging infrastructure, outlined application requirements and scoring criteria, and emphasized the program's goals of supporting tourism, expanding charging access, and encouraging economic activity in local communities. Additionally, NHDES noted that funding remains available through its Clean Diesel Program for the replacement of diesel vehicles and equipment.

6. Other Business

J. Wade shared that the energy clean diesel program still open for replacing diesel vehicles and equipment. So, there's $540,000 still available, especially for municipalities and other public entities.

S. Brock shared that Clean Energy NH is partnering with the national Charging Smart initiative to provide technical assistance to municipalities over the coming year. The program will help communities prepare for expanded EV charging infrastructure by supporting grant applications, developing permitting best practices, and providing model language for local regulations and future planning efforts. She encouraged interested municipalities to work with Katrin to take advantage of these resources.

7. Citizens Forum

There were no citizens comments

8. Adjourn

D. Manter motioned to adjourn seconded by S. Wrightsman. All members voted unanimously in favor. The meeting adjourned at 11:00 AM.

Respectfully submitted,

Megan Taylor-Fetter

Land Use and Environment Chapter

SRPC Regional Plan Forward Thinking

(First page to be replaced with PDF cover)

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Acknowledgments

[Note thanking the public, local municipal officials and staff, regional partners, other RPCs, the Commissioners, and the Regional Plan Subcommittee]

Regional Plan Subcommittee

[Note explaining the regional plan subcommittee]

Katrin Kasper, Lee

Mark Richardson, Somersworth

Sarah Wrightsman, Newmarket

Don Manter, Northwood

Steve Brown, Dover

Paul Rassmussen, Durham

Commissioners

[list out all the commissioners]

Funding Acknowledgment

[HUD funding note for this chapter]

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Introduction

The future of the Strafford Region will depend, in part, on how effectively communities balance environmental protection with economic growth and development. The region's natural resources are fundamental to its character, quality of life, and economic vitality; however, they have finite supplies. If not properly managed, these resources will be unable to support the development needed to meet demands associated with projected growth, such as additional housing, commercial activity, and infrastructure.

The responsible use of energy resources, including fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and gas, as well as the extraction of industrial minerals and metals, present long-term environmental challenges. For this region, one of the most significant concerns will be access to a reliable supply of clean drinking water. Fresh water is an irreplaceable resource that is crucial to public health, economic activity, and the ability of communities to accommodate future development. The sustainability of existing and future water supplies will require significant investments in resilient infrastructure, improved stormwater management, protection of groundwater recharge areas and aquifers, and greater regional collaboration to manage, share, and protect water supplies.

Protecting and managing these resources will influence where, when, and how development may occur, and ultimately will inform whether there is capacity to accommodate such growth. As the region continues to face development pressure, communities will need to better understand that the availability of natural resources is not limitless and make strategic decisions to support current and future residents.

Purpose

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the current state of land use and environmental resources in the Strafford Region and to identify goals, strategies, and actions to guide their management into the future. Central to this chapter is the recognition that environmental protection and economic growth are interconnected, and that land use planning is essential to balancing these priorities. Planning for the future is vital to effectively protect the environmental assets that are at the heart of the region's character, contribute to economic activity, and draw many to live, work, and play here.

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[placeholder for description of public comment period and date of adoption]

To inform this chapter, SRPC staff gathered input from local stakeholders and the public, with feedback from the Regional Plan Subcommittee throughout the development process. The 2026-2050 Land Use and Environment Chapter includes the following content:

- An overview of existing land uses and environmental resources
- Feedback gathered during the chapter development process
- A vision, four themes, and cross-cutting lenses that provide strategic direction for land use and environmental planning
- An implementation plan with strategies and actions

Together, these elements provide a framework for regional and local decision-making, with the goal of ensuring that communities remain resilient and capable of meeting uncertain challenges.

Data Disclaimer

It is important to note that data cannot always be analyzed for the exact SRPC planning region if the original source data is compiled for different geographies. When data for the region is not available, Strafford County is used as an approximation, but data is also provided for Carroll and Rockingham Counties where possible. When regional sources are limited, state or national data is used as needed.

SRPC conducts region-wide analysis of over 160 data metrics each year for a variety of projects and plans. This analysis, called the Regional Data Snapshot, covers demographics, economic vitality, livability and quality of life, mobility and accessibility, and resiliency. It is updated every year, with additional metrics added as they are developed.

The 2026 Data Snapshot contains many of the metrics discussed in this document and can be found at https://straffordrpcnh.gov/measure/data-snapshot/.

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Regional Overview

Geographic Background

The Strafford Region occupies southeastern New Hampshire, bounded by Maine along the Salmon Falls and Piscataqua rivers, Rockingham County to the south, Carroll County to the north, and Belknap and Merrimack counties to the west. It lies about 60 miles from both Boston and Portland.

The region sits between the Lakes Region, the Atlantic Seacoast, and the Merrimack Valley, giving residents access to major recreation areas, coastal communities, urban centers, and the Interstate 93 corridor.

Southern communities are closely tied to employment centers in greater Boston and the Seacoast, while northern and western communities connect more strongly to the Lakes Region and White Mountain National Forest.

Known for its natural resources, cultural heritage, and mix of urban and rural communities, the region includes the Tri-Cities of Dover, Rochester, and Somersworth, as well as Durham and the University of New Hampshire.

Most of the Strafford Region lies within the Coastal Watershed, where five coastal rivers converge in Great Bay before flowing through Portsmouth Harbor to the Gulf of Maine. These waterways powered historic textile mills and shaped development in communities along the Cochecho, Lamprey, Salmon Falls, and Oyster rivers.

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Existing Land Use

New Hampshire uses a consistent land use data collection methodology called the NH Land Use Mapping Standard.[1] The standard establishes a classification scheme and mapping protocols for generating land use data from high-resolution aerial imagery. Imagery is typically collected every five years, except for the 2020 imagery, which was delayed by two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic and was not collected until 2022.

According to land use data developed by SRPC, the Strafford Region encompasses approximately 348,340 acres, or 544 square miles. Forested land is the predominant land use type in the region, accounting for approximately 59% of the total land area. The share of forested land has continued to decline as development has increased. Urban and built-up land is the second largest land use category, accounting for approximately 22% of the region. Rounding out the five largest land use categories are wetlands (8%), water (6%), and agriculture (4%). Minor variations in the acreage of wetlands and open water over time are due in part to the availability of better imagery. However, continued loss of agricultural land and active farms extends beyond imagery and measurement improvements and represents a longer-term regional trend consistent with patterns seen across New England.

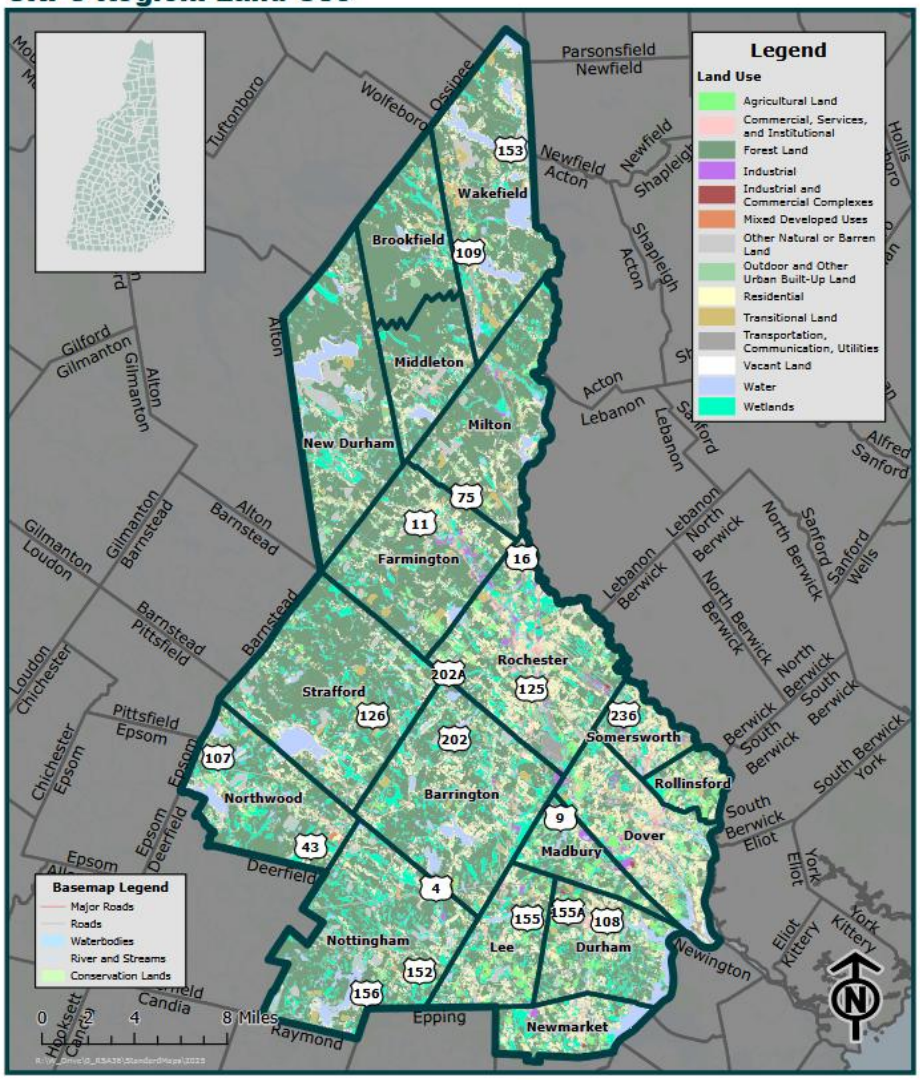
Table ##. Land Use Change from 1962 to 2022

Land Use Type	2022 Data		1998 Data		1962 Data	
	Area (Acres)	Total Area (%)	Area (Acres)	Change (%)	Area (Acres)	Change (%)
Urban Built-Up Land	76,359	22	72,542	5	66,432	13
Agriculture	12,462	4	12,711	-2	13,888	-10
Forest	202,845	59	215,015	-6	233,271	-15
Water	19,489	5	19,489	0	18,904	3
Wetlands	37,185	9	36,069	3	33,838	9
Total	**348,340**					

While the Strafford Region benefits economically from growth in residential, transportation, commercial, and industrial development, growth that is not thoughtfully planned and managed can adversely impact the region's landscape and local environment. Understanding where and how these changes occur is important context for the region's broader land use trends and their environmental implications.

[1] Developed by GRANIT staff at Earth Systems Research Center, University of New Hampshire, in consultation with the Office of Planning and Development and the nine Regional Planning Commissions.

SRPC Region: Land Use



Presented by
Strafford Regional Planning Commission

150 Wakefield Street #12
Rochester, NH 03867
603-994-3500

Author: Brian Notinger
Date: February, 2026

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Changes in Land Use

Between 1998 and 2022, urban and built-up land in the region increased by approximately 5% due to population increase and shifts in housing demand. This has resulted in the conversion of thousands of acres of previously undeveloped open space, including forested and agricultural lands.

According to the Land Conservation Plan for New Hampshire's Coastal Watersheds,[2] this conversion often comes with fragmentation of large forest blocks, increases in impervious surfaces, and loss of natural resource values including plant and wildlife habitat, clean water, and other important ecosystem services.

Forest Cover

In the Strafford Region, forested land accounts for approximately 202,846 acres (59%) and is the predominant land use type. Forests provide critical wildlife corridors and habitat, clean air and water, recreational opportunities, carbon storage, and timber harvesting. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, in 2025, wood and wood-derived fuels from the state's forest products industry provided 84% of the state's biomass-fueled generation.[3]

Historically, the decline and recovery of New Hampshire's forests have been closely tied to major economic shifts over the course of two centuries. The first major change occurred during the peak of agriculture and the "Great Sheep Boom" in the early 1800s, where large areas of forest were cleared for pasture.[4] As the wool industry declined, many abandoned fields gradually returned to forested land, primarily white pine. Later, as industrial logging, railroads, and shipbuilding in the 1900s became increasingly lucrative, many of these mature and middle-aged white pine forests were harvested, marking another major period of forest loss.[5] Today, the loss of forest cover is primarily associated with development.

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[2] https://connect-protect.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/NH-Coastal-Watershed-Conservation-Plan-20210630.pdf
[3] U.S. EIA, Electricity Data Browser, Annual, 2025.
[4] https://www.salisburyhistoricalsociety.org/the-great-sheep-boom-rock-walls/
[5] https://nhlakes.org/wp-content/uploads/4D-Finding-Funding_-Grant-and-Loan-Program-Partnerships-to-Support-Lake-and-Watershed-Planning-and-Implementation-Projects.pdf

Since 1998, the region has lost over 38,000 acres of forested land, including 21,217 acres since 2010. Most of the loss had occurred in urban areas, with forest being replaced predominantly by single family homes.

The 2015 Regional Master Plan for the Strafford Region referenced a 2009 USDA study[6] that indicated the Piscataqua-Salmon Falls watershed ranked third in the United States for the greatest predicted change in housing density on forested land between 2000 and 2030. A more recent study by the USDA in 2014[7] ranked the top 100 watersheds according to the importance of private forests to surface drinking water supplies. Among states east of the Mississippi River, New Hampshire, particularly the southern part of the state, contained the greatest number of watersheds (16) where private forests are important to drinking water and threatened by high levels of development.

Together, these reports demonstrate the significance of forests in the Strafford Region, both for their contribution to clean drinking water and because of the potential for continued forest loss due to development. This underscores the importance of protecting the valuable ecosystem services these forests provide through land use planning, regulation, conservation, and best management practices.

Agriculture

Agriculture provides many benefits to communities, including production of local food for human consumption; pastures for horses, cattle, goats, sheep, pigs, and other farm animals; and scenic views of historic family farms, rolling green pastures, and rural landscapes for residents and visitors to enjoy.

At the same time, farming is a challenging business, with farms facing a variety of pressures that can affect their ability to remain economically viable, including rising operational costs, environmental uncertainties, and labor shortages. In recent years, agritourism has become one way for farms to diversify their income and offset losses resulting from hazards such as drought, extreme temperatures, flooding, insects, and disease.[8]

As defined by RSA 21:34-a, Agritourism means "attracting visitors to a working farm for the purpose of eating a meal, making overnight stays, enjoyment of the farm environment, education on farm operations, or active

[6] A Sensitivity Analysis of "Forests on the Edge: Housing Development on America's Private Forests"
[7] Private Forests, Housing Growth, and America's Water Supply
[8] https://www.nhfoodalliance.org/climate-resilience-disaster-relief

involvement in the activity of the farm which is ancillary to the farm operation."

According to the NH Food Alliance, [9] agritourism can offer valuable opportunities for farms and other agricultural businesses to generate diversified, multi-season income, while offering memorable and educational farm-based experiences for visitors. Through activities and entertainment, such as farm stays, pick-your-own fruits and vegetables, corn mazes, and festivals, agritourism in New Hampshire provides residents and tourists with meaningful opportunities to connect with the state's rural heritage and learn about food sources, animal care, and other aspects of farm management.

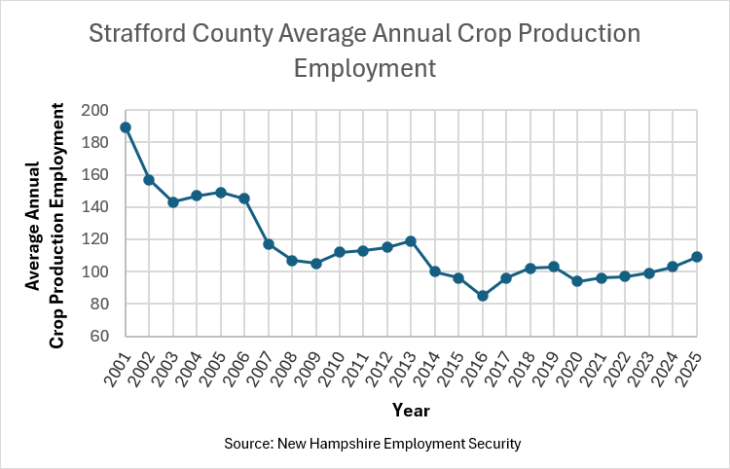
Between 1962 and 2022, the Strafford Region lost about 2,100 acres of agricultural land. This represents a broad cultural shift regionwide away from private family farms. This trend continued through 1998, where a further 487 acres of farmland have been lost.

The loss of agricultural land over time is an impactful trend, but it does not tell the whole story of agriculture in the region. Other indicators suggest that, despite these losses, smaller-scale agricultural operations continue to be an important part of the region's agricultural landscape. According to New Hampshire Employment Security data for Strafford County, the annual average employment associated with crop production, a subset of the larger Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing industry, has shown a steady decline from 2000-2016. [10] However, this trend recently began to level off, and crop production employment rates have slowly begun to rise over the past decade.

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[9] https://www.nhfoodalliance.org/agritourism

[10] Includes establishments (e.g., farms, orchards, greenhouses, nurseries) primarily engaged in the production of crops, plants, vines, and trees (excluding forestry operations).



Similarly, while the amount of land in agricultural use has declined, along with the average farm size, the number of farms has increased over the past 20 years. Together, these trends suggest that agricultural activity is not disappearing from the region, but rather is changing in scale, with smaller farming operations continuing to contribute to the local agricultural economy.

Commented [MP1]: Might be good to loop in the message of family farms, sole proprietorships, etc.

Table XX: Changes in Farming Statistics in Strafford County

Item	2002	2007	2012	2017	2022
# of Farms	281	303	354	310	332
Total Acreage	33,597	25,744	30,680	23,186	28,143
Average Size of Farm	120	85	87	75	85
USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service, Census of Agriculture – County Data					

Despite the recent increase in small-scale farms, agricultural land throughout the region remains vulnerable to development, particularly because agricultural soils are often well drained and existing cleared land offers favorable topography that is attractive for conversion. Additional environmental benefits include groundwater recharge and flood mitigation, maintaining diverse ecosystems, preserving wildlife corridors, and carbon sequestration. [11] Supporting local farmers, protecting prime soils, and encouraging creative ways to diversify farm income will help ensure that agriculture remains a productive and valued part of the region's landscape and economy.

[11] https://extension.unh.edu/nhnriguide/nri-components/farmlands

Urban and Built-Up Land & Housing Pressure

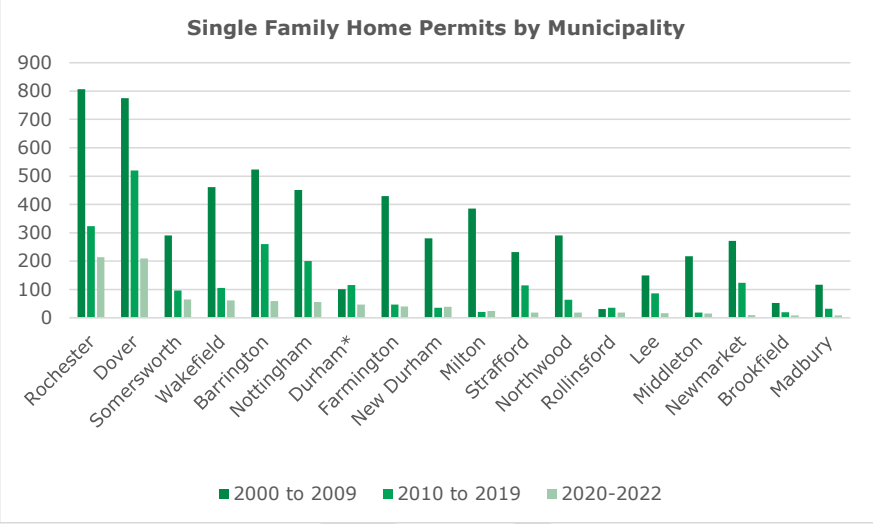
After forested lands, urban and built-up land (more commonly referred to as developed land) is the second largest land use type in the region, encompassing over 76,000 acres. Urban and built-up land is a broad land use category that includes residential; commercial, services, and institutional; industrial; transportation, communications, and utilities; industrial and commercial complexes; mixed development uses; outdoor and other urban and built-up land; and vacant land.

Residential development is the largest subcategory of urban and built-up land, accounting for nearly 13% of the region. This category includes single-family, duplex, multi-family housing, manufactured housing parks, and group and transient quarters. According to SRPC's 2022 land use data, the region has gained more than 5,000 acres of residential development since 2010. The extent of residential development reflects the widespread availability of land zoned for housing. SRPC's zoning analysis found that all 18 municipalities allow single-family residential development, and that over 98% of the region is zoned to allow for some form of residential development.

The 2023 Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA)[12] indicates that single-family residential accounts for 72% of all housing structures in the region, while the remaining 28% are duplexes and multi-family units. Higher-density housing is often concentrated in areas with access to public water and sewer infrastructure, such as the Tri-Cities of Dover, Rochester, and Somersworth, as well as Durham and Newmarket. Farmington is also identified as having a relatively concentrated housing stock. More rural communities dependent on private wells and septic systems, such as Barrington and Nottingham, have historically experienced predominantly single-family development.

Municipal building permits are another metric that can be used to better understand residential development trends. Throughout the region, building permits remained relatively high during the early 2000s before declining sharply following the 2006 housing market peak and subsequent downturn. Although permit activity began to increase, it remained significantly below levels seen prior to the crash. The region began to experience a more notable increase in building permits in 2016.[13]

[12] https://docs.straffordrpcnh.gov/documents/plans/rpc/rhna_2023.pdf
[13] https://docs.straffordrpcnh.gov/documents/plans/rpc/datasnapshot_2026.pdf



While land use data, regional housing needs statistics, and building permit activity can provide an indication of residential development, they do not capture the growing challenge of housing affordability. Limited housing supply and high demand have contributed to rising home prices throughout the region. According to a recent report by NH Housing, the median sale price for a single-family home in New Hampshire reached a record of $575,000 as of June 2026. In Strafford County, a household would need to earn approximately $160,000 annually to afford a median-priced home. This is about twice the county's estimated 2026 median household income of $79,852.[14]

Where and how development occurs can also influence quality of life. Future land use and development patterns affect access to jobs, services, and recreational opportunities, as well as the infrastructure needed to support growth. Results from SRPC's outreach indicate that many participants support Smart Growth principles that encourage infill, redevelopment, and concentration of new development in established areas with existing infrastructure, including municipal water and sewer, sidewalks, and public transportation networks. Water and sewer utilities, specifically, tend to support greater densities and economic development opportunities.

[14] New Hampshire REALTORS, New Hampshire Monthly Indicators: June 2026 (ShowingTime Plus, 2026), accessed July 24, 2026, https://nhar-public.stats.showingtime.com/ docs/mmi/2026-06/x/report?src=page

At the same time, the region includes communities and residents who value more rural settings, including larger lot sizes and greater separation between homes. While this type of development may require growth to extend in a more dispersed pattern, it remains an important housing preference that should be considered alongside efforts to concentrate development in existing urban centers. The region's housing needs will continue to change as household sizes, ages, incomes, and preferences evolve. Providing a variety of housing types is essential to ensuring that residents have meaningful choices about where they live, while allowing communities to manage growth in ways that reflect their infrastructure capacity and local character.

Land Resources

Land and water resources are foundational to the character, economy, and quality of life of the Strafford Region. Forests, wetlands, rivers, lakes, coastal areas, and other natural resources provide important wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, drinking water, and other ecosystem services. The region's conservation land and extensive surface and groundwater resources are essential, not only for sustaining vibrant ecosystems, but also for supporting healthy and resilient communities.

Conservation

Conservation lands are properties that are generally undeveloped and protected from development. According to the Land Conservation Plan for New Hampshire's Coastal Watersheds,[15] protecting these lands helps maintain the natural resource functions that support a healthy environment, making the identification and prioritization of undeveloped land an important component of land use planning at both the local and regional scales. Typical protection mechanisms include local land use regulations, deed restrictions, and conservation easements. The Easement Stewardship Program at the Southeast Land Trust (SELT) emphasizes the importance of structuring the legal language of these protections to balance the permanent protection of important resources, such as forestry, wildlife habitat,[16] and water resources, with flexibility for appropriate uses such as sustainable agriculture and passive recreation. While recreation activities, such as hiking, biking, and fishing, are commonly associated with conserved lands, conservation and recreation are

[15] https://connect-protect.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/NH-Coastal-Watershed-Conservation-Plan-20210630.pdf

[16] In addition to flora and fauna, these habitats provide numerous environmental benefits, ranging from carbon dioxide storage to coastal erosion protection.

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not always compatible. Land can be conserved primarily for its ecological or resource values without providing public recreational access.

According to SRPC's Data Snapshot,[17] there are approximately 67,110 acres of conservation land (19% of the region's land area). The amount of conserved land has increased nearly 5% since SRPC's prior regional plan was adopted in 2015. The municipalities with the greatest percentage of land conserved are Durham (42%) and Nottingham (32%).[18]

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[17] https://docs.straffordrpcnh.gov/documents/plans/rpc/datasnapshot_2026.pdf
[18] Both communities are heavily influenced by lands owned by the University of New Hampshire in Durham and Pawtuckaway State Park in Nottingham.

Table ##: Conservation Lands by Community

Community	Square Miles of Conservation	Percent of Municipality
Durham	10.32	42%
Nottingham	15.54	32%
Madbury	3.30	27%
Lee	5.16	26%
Strafford	13.55	26%
Brookfield	5.47	24%
Milton	8.21	24%
Newmarket	3.41	24%
Middleton	3.98	21%
Barrington	9.98	21%
Dover	5.69	20%
Rollinsford	1.37	18%
Northwood	4.91	16%
Somersworth	1.14	11%
Farmington	3.87	10%
Rochester	3.51	8%
New Durham	3.27	7%
Wakefield	2.18	5%

Wildlife Habitat

The New Hampshire State Wildlife Action Plan (WAP) [19] is the state's foundational document for species and habitat conservation. The WAP indicates that the main habitats within the region are Appalachian oak-pine (115,741 acres) and Hemlock-hardwood-pine (104,595 acres).

Habitats	Acres
Appalachian oak-pine	115,741
Cliff and Talus	409
Coastal island	17
Developed Impervious	26,555
Developed or Barren land	28,873
Dune	39
Floodplain forest	1,424
Grassland	19,778
Hemlock-hardwood-pine	104,595
Lowland spruce-fir	0
Northern hardwood-conifer	1,652
Northern swamp	67
Open water	19,734
Peatland	3,755
Rocky ridge	790
Salt marsh	551
Sand/Gravel	1,616
Temperate swamp	7,822
Wet meadow/shrub wetland	14,414
Total	347,831

[19] https://www.wildlife.nh.gov/wildlife-and-habitat/nh-state-wildlife-action-plan

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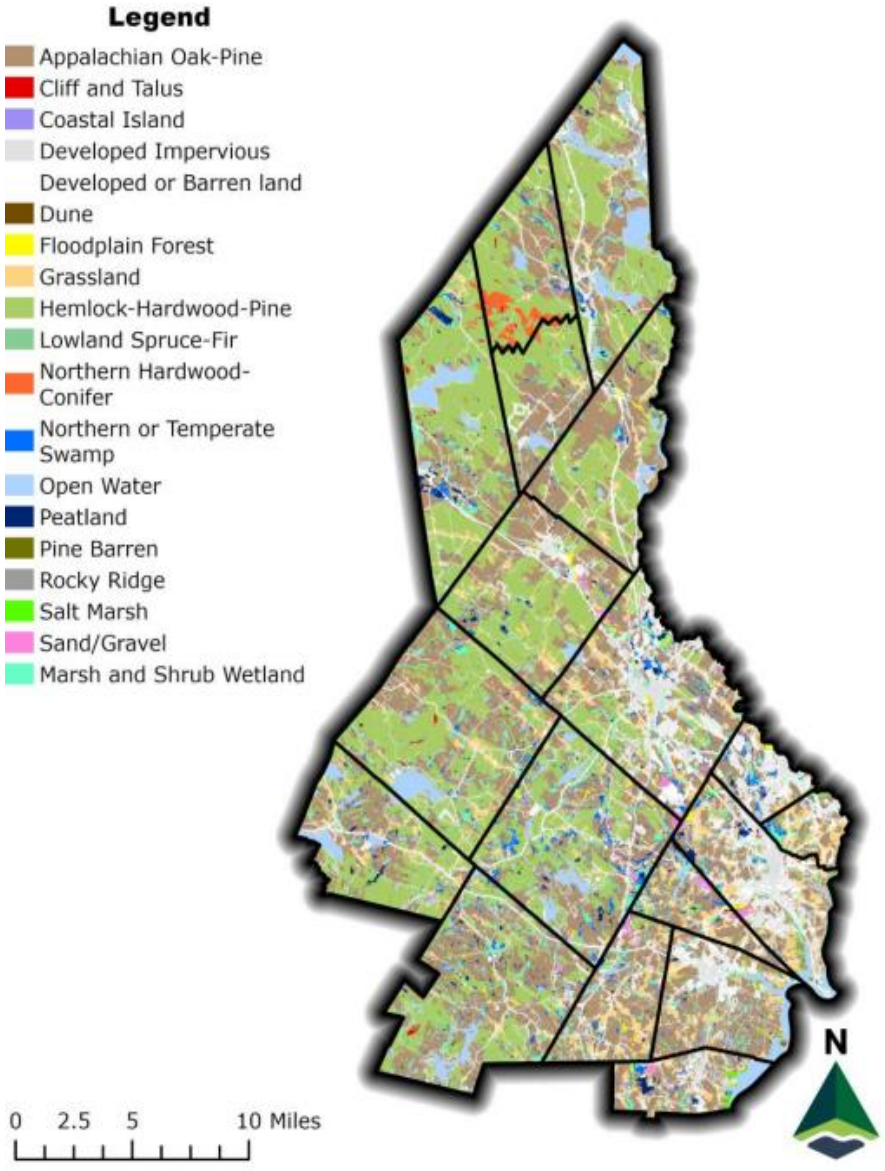

Legend
Appalachian Oak-Pine
Cliff and Talus
Coastal Island
Developed Impervious
Developed or Barren land
Dune
Floodplain Forest
Grassland
Hemlock-Hardwood-Pine
Lowland Spruce-Fir
Northern Hardwood-Conifer
Northern or Temperate Swamp
Open Water
Peatland
Pine Barren
Rocky Ridge
Salt Marsh
Sand/Gravel
Marsh and Shrub Wetland
N
0 2.5 5 10 Miles

Table ##: Wildlife Action Plan Habitat Tiers

Tiers[20]	Acres	Region [%]
Tier #1: Highest Ranked in the State by Ecological Condition	86,527	25
Tier #2 Highest Ranked in the Biological Region by Ecological Condition	52,708	15
Tier #3: Supporting Landscapes	96,578	28

Commented [KP2]: @Brian Notinger can you add in the percentages?

Recreation

New Hampshire is known for its year-round recreational opportunities, including camping, fishing, hiking and trail running, hunting, mountain biking, motorized boating, skiing and snowboarding, and snowmobiling, all of which are critical to attracting individuals to the state. According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account,[21] outdoor recreation contributed $4.2B in value added to New Hampshire's economy in 2024, an increase of approximately $200M compared to the prior regional master plan in 2015. Outdoor recreation accounted for 3.5% of the state's gross domestic product (GDP) and supported more than 33,000 jobs.[22]

At the county-level, tourism and outdoor recreation activities can be tracked through the New Hampshire Travel Impacts dashboard.[23] The Travel Impact reports include direct economic impacts of travel to and through New Hampshire and its tourism regions and counties by expenditures, earnings, employment, government revenues, and overnight visitor volume and average overnight spending. According to the dashboard, total spending in Strafford County has generally increased over the past decade, aside from a decline in 2020 associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. This spending rose from approximately $166M in 2011 to $240M in 2025.

The Strafford Region's location between the Lakes Region, White Mountains, and Seacoast provides residents and visitors with access to a wide variety of recreational opportunities. Participants in SRPC's recent outreach efforts cited abundant public open space, interconnected hiking trails, high-quality fishing, and other water-based recreation as key strengths.

[20] **Tier 1**: Areas with this ranking reflect broad patterns of geomorphology, geologic origin, stratigraphy, regional climate, topography, and natural vegetation; **Tier 2**: Areas with this ranking reflect the same as Tier 1, but on a more local or regional scale; **Tier 3**: Areas with this ranking enhance the ecological balance and biodiversity of an area.
[21] https://apps.bea.gov/regional/outdoor-recreation/pdf/New%20Hampshire2024.pdf
[22] https://apps.bea.gov/regional/outdoor-recreation/pdf/New%20Hampshire2024.pdf
[23] https://www.travelstats.com/qimpacts/newhampshire

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In 2021, SRPC collected information on publicly accessible recreation sites throughout the region as part of a project called Promoting Outdoor Play! (POP!).[24] The data, which can be viewed through an interactive online mapping website, demonstrates widespread access to a variety of recreational facilities, including 86 open space and trail sites, 71 sports fields and courts, and 54 playgrounds (refer to table below). Together, these resources provide opportunities for residents and visitors to participate in outdoor recreation close to where they live and contribute to the region's quality of life.

The region includes numerous recreational destinations, ranging from local parks and trails to larger conservation and recreation areas. Notable sites include Wagon Hill Farm and College Woods in Durham, Dover's Community Trail, Moose Mountain Recreation Area in Brookfield, Cotton Valley Trail in Wakefield and Brookfield, Blue Job State Forest in Strafford and Farmington, Stonehouse Pond in Barrington, Sweet Trail in Durham and Newmarket, Bellamy River Wildlife Management Area in Dover, Kingman Farm in Madbury, and the Farmington-Rochester Rail Trail.

Table ##: Recreational Sites in the Region

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Recreation Site's Primary Use	Barrington	Brookfield	Dover	Durham	Farmington	Lee	Madbury	Middleton	Milton	New Durham	Newmarket	Northwood	Nottingham	Rochester	Rollinsford	Somersworth	Strafford	Wakefield	SRPC
Beach								1	1	1		4	2					3	**12**
Boating Access	1		3	3					1	5	4	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	**27**
Community Garden			1	1							1				1		1		**5**
Disc Golf Course		1	1											2				1	**5**
Dog Park			1			1										1			**3**
Fishing Access			1	1			2						1						**5**
Golf Course						1													**1**
Gym			2																**2**
Open Space and Trails	11	3	6	17	4	2	2	1	6	4	7	2	4	6	2	5	4		**86**
Park	1		10	4	3				3		2		1	7	3	3		2	**39**
Playground	2		13	2	2	3	1	1	2	2	2	1	3	9	1	5	1	4	**54**
Pool			2								1			3					**6**
Rail Trail		1	10		1									1				2	**15**
Skatepark			1	1							1							1	**4**
Skating Rink	1		2	1										1		1			**6**
Sledding Hill			2	1							1					1			**5**
Sports Fields and Courts	4		12	2	3	3	2	1	2	1	5	3	2	12	3	10	1	4	**71**
Grand Total	**20**	**5**	**67**	**33**	**13**	**10**	**7**	**4**	**15**	**13**	**24**	**11**	**15**	**43**	**12**	**27**	**8**	**18**	**347**

In addition to local parks, trails, and other recreation areas, the Strafford Region is home to two New Hampshire State Parks. Pawtuckaway State Park in Nottingham spans 5,600 acres and supports activities including camping,

[24] https://straffordrpcnh.gov/projects/promoting-outdoor-play/

biking, hiking, and fishing. Northwood Meadows State Park covers 675 acres and supports hunting, non-motorized boating, and snowmobiling.

Recreational opportunities also extend beyond the region's boundaries into the greater Seacoast area. According to the Seacoast Collaborative Economic Development Region Profile,[25] notable destinations include Hampton Beach State Park, Jenness Beach State Park, Great Bay National Wildlife Refuge, and the Rockingham Rail Trail.

Water Resources

Water resources include surface water such as rivers, streams, brooks, lakes, ponds, and wetlands, as well as groundwater resources such as stratified drift aquifers. Protecting these resources is important for maintaining clean drinking water, protecting shoreland and riparian habitats, reducing flood risks, and providing recreational opportunities. As the region grows, careful planning and management of these resources will be important to preserve their environmental, economic, and community benefits.

Another abundant topic identified in SRPC's outreach, communities consistently identify open space, agricultural land, forests, scenic landscapes, and wildlife habitat as defining assets that should shape land use policy. In many places, these resources are described not only as environmental assets, but as essential to local identity, quality of life, and long-term sustainability. As development pressures continue to alter the landscape, thoughtful planning and management of these resources will be critical to effectively balancing growth with the protection of the natural resources that define the region.

Surface Waters

Surface waters include rivers and streams, lakes, ponds, reservoirs, and wetlands. These waterbodies and their associated watersheds provide important wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, drinking water, and sources of water for emergency response.

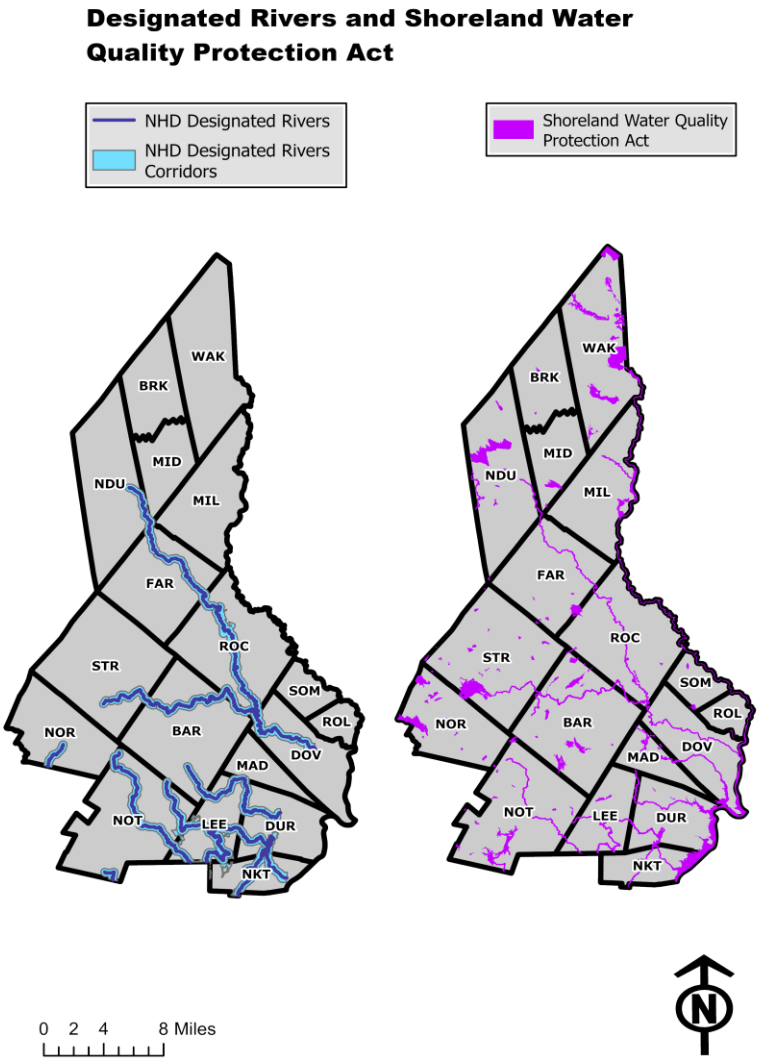
Rivers and Streams

The Strafford region is bordered by the Salmon Falls River along the Maine state line. Other major rivers in the region include the Bellamy, Cocheco, Isinglass, Lamprey, and Oyster Rivers. Four of these rivers are designated

[25] https://www.nheconomy.com/getmedia/a59a675a-2db9-4e45-bf1f-9b44b7c54f56/NH-ORID-Outdoor-Industry-Inventory-Report_2024.pdf

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under the state's Rivers Management and Protection Program (RMPP): the Lamprey River (1990 and 2011), Isinglass River (2002), Cocheco River (2009), and Oyster River (2011).



Managed by the NH Department of Environmental Services, the RMPP seeks to manage and protect designated rivers and their associated resources through local advisory committees and river corridor management plans addressing river shorelines and adjacent lands. Other state regulatory mechanisms include the Shoreland Water Quality Protection Act, which regulates vegetation removal, excavation, fill, and development within protected shoreland areas, as well as the Wetlands Dredge and Fill permitting process, which regulates activities that directly impact wetlands.

In addition to these state programs, municipalities can implement local protection measures for water resources through their zoning ordinances. These measures may include stormwater regulations, shoreland and wetland overlay districts, and requirements for vegetated buffers along waterbodies and wetlands.

The Lamprey River has the largest tributary system to the Great Bay Estuary, flowing through fourteen New Hampshire municipalities, including five within the SRPC region. It is composed of the Lamprey, North Branch, North, Little, Pawtuckaway, and Piscassic Rivers and encompasses 95 square miles within the SRPC region.[26] In addition to its state designation, the Lamprey River has a 23.5-mile stretch that is designated into the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers program through the National Park Service. It is one of two rivers in New Hampshire with this designation, the other being the Wildcat River in Jackson.[27]

Lakes, Ponds, and Reservoirs

The Strafford Region is home to 54 great ponds or natural waterbodies of at least 10 acres, including several of regional significance such as Bow Lake, Pawtuckaway Lake, Northwood Lake, Merrymeeting Lake, Swains Lake, Milton Three Ponds, and the Bellamy Reservoir.

According to SRPC's 2022 Land Use dataset, open water comprises nearly 20,000 acres in the Strafford Region, or approximately 3-4% of the region's total acreage. Lakes and ponds provide important habitat for fish, wildlife, and aquatic and shoreline vegetation, while also supporting recreational activities such as swimming, fishing, and boating for residents and visitors.

[26] Pg. 31 regionalplan_environment_2015.pdf

[27] https://rms.memberclicks.net/assets/PWSRToolkit/Lamprey_20_year_report_Mar_2017_DRAFT_compressed.pdf

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In recent years, SRPC has used grant funding to support the protection of the region's lakes, including the development of watershed management plans for Sunrise Lake, Milton Three Ponds, and Bow Lake.

Wetlands

At nearly 30,000 acres, wetlands cover approximately 6-8% of the region and represent an important natural resource. Wetland types can range based on soil and vegetation. Wetlands provide habitat for a diverse range of plant and animal species, such as sphagnum mosses, Atlantic white cedar, Blandings turtle, and diamondback terrapin. Wetland areas also provide critical habitat for waterfowl and wading birds, such as the wood duck and blue heron, as well as amphibians, reptiles, and other wildlife. Some wetland areas are created or maintained by beaver activity, making the management of beaver dams crucial to the region's wetland health.

In addition to providing habitat, wetlands perform important natural functions that benefit communities. They store floodwaters, helping to reduce impacts of flooding. Their ability to retain water may become increasingly important as heavy rainfall events become more frequent and intense. Wetlands also store significant amounts of carbon and contribute to broader ecosystem functions that support water quality and wildlife.

Great Bay Estuary

The Great Bay Estuary is recognized as an estuary of national significance and is one of the region's most important water resources. The estuary is connected to the Atlantic Ocean through the Piscataqua River and receives freshwater from seven coastal rivers. Its tidal and brackish waters support diverse aquatic and terrestrial habitats and provide important places for fish, shellfish, waterfowl, and other wildlife to flourish. Dozens of bird species use the estuary and surrounding areas as wintering habitat, while horseshoe crabs rely on the tidal waters for spawning in the spring. More than 10,000 acres of conserved land surround Great Bay, providing additional habitat for animals such as the white-tailed deer and muskrat. The estuary also supports ecologically important plant species, including eelgrass, which is a highly productive and important habitat that sequesters carbon, stabilizes shorelines, and supports essential feeding grounds and protective nursery habitats for a variety of fish, crabs, and shellfish.[28]

[28] https://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1465&context=prep

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Pollution and Threats

Both point and non-point source pollution contribute to the degradation of the region's water resources. Nitrogen loading in the Great Bay Estuary is a particular concern. Stormwater runoff, erosion and sedimentation, and other sources of pollution both affect and are affected by conditions throughout the greater coastal watershed.

Impaired water quality can limit the beneficial uses of waterbodies, with impacts ranging from reduced recreational opportunities to potential threats to public health. At the municipal level, best management practices, local ordinances, and overlay zoning districts can help protect water resources and the ecosystems they support. Educating residents and building local capacity to manage stormwater and reduce non-point source pollution on private property can also foster environmental stewardship and improve water quality.[29]

Groundwater

Groundwater is water stored beneath the ground surface within geologic features, such as sediment and rock formations, that transmit water to wells and springs. In the Strafford Region, groundwater is accessed through both fractured bedrock wells and wells that are drawn from sand and gravel deposits, also known as stratified drift aquifers.[30] Stratified drift aquifers are particularly important groundwater resources, covering approximately 30% of the region. Groundwater supplies are generally replenished through recharge, as precipitation and surface water infiltrate into the ground.

Water Infrastructure

Water infrastructure is a major community asset that treats and conveys water and wastewater, controls flooding, and influences growth and development patterns. Quality of life within the region depends on functioning water infrastructure and protected water resources that provide drinking water, recreational opportunities, wildlife habitat, and other community benefits.[31]

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Commented [LW7R6]: alternatively, all 'threats' could be addressed in the 'existing and emerging threats' section belowf

[29] LocalSolutions2015
[30] RSA 485-C:2, means a geologic formation of predominantly well-sorted sediment deposited by or in bodies of glacial meltwater, including gravel, sand, silt, or clay, which contains sufficient saturated permeable material to yield significant quantities of water to wells.
[31] LocalSolutions2015

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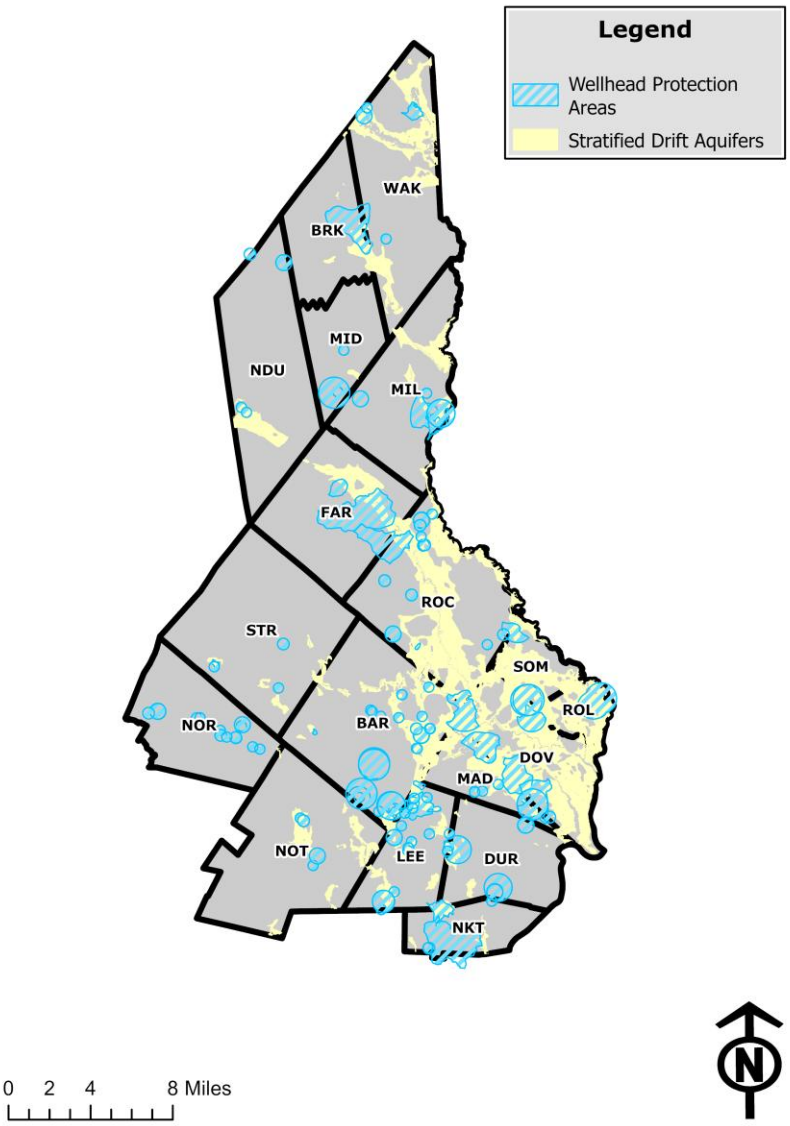
Drinking Water

Access to safe and reliable drinking water is essential to public health and community sustainability. While public water systems are subject to stringent drinking water standards at both the federal and state levels, private wells are generally the responsibility of individual property owners. NHDES estimates that levels of radon and arsenic exceed recommended water quality standards in more than 95% of private wells, indicating a potential health risk.[32]

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[32] https://www.des.nh.gov/sites/g/files/ehbemt341/files/documents/2020-01/wd-07-29.pdf

Wellhead Protection Areas and Stratified Drift Aquifers



Both surface and groundwater sources supply the region's public drinking water systems. Approximately 66% of residents within the region are served by five large public systems and 34% use private, household drilled or dug wells.[33] This amounts to approximately 92,000 residents served by large septic systems and 48,000 on small, private systems. This represents a slight decrease from 2015.

Protecting drinking water supplies requires consideration of both water quality and the lands that contribute to those supplies. According to the NHDES Guide to Groundwater Protection,[34] the most effective way to protect groundwater is to exclude potential threats from contributing areas by controlling land uses through land protection efforts and local ordinances.

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Planning for an emergency drinking water supply is an important part of local emergency management as power damages to critical water infrastructure, power interruptions, droughts, or contamination can impact the availability of drinking water supplies. Additional considerations for drinking water include meeting the anticipated demand of a growing population, maintaining clean and adequate supplies, and identifying opportunities to increase the resiliency of public water systems through interconnectivity, asset management, and other resilience measures.[35]

Wastewater Infrastructure

Wastewater treatment plants are facilities that process wastewater from homes and businesses prior to discharging into a local water body. Despite treatment, wastewater often contains nitrogen and phosphorus from human waste, food, and certain soaps and detergents that can contribute to point source pollution.[36]

In the Strafford Region, there are eight municipal wastewater treatment plants.

Despite the perception that these facilities are the primary cause of nitrogen loading, the Piscataqua Region Estuaries Partnership's (PREP) State of Our Estuaries (SOOE) Report indicates that of the 17 facilities in the coastal watershed, they account for 22% of the total nitrogen between 2017-2020. Additionally, the report goes on to say that the 2017-2020 point source loads

Commented [LW9]: should this say 'indicates that the 17 facilities in the coastal watershed account for 22%...' ? confusing wording currently

[33] https://straffordrpcnh.gov/uploads/documents/plans/rpc/regionalplan_localsolutions_2015.pdf
[34] https://www.des.nh.gov/sites/g/files/ehbemt341/files/documents/2020-01/wd-07-29.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com
[35] LocalSolutions2015
[36] https://www.epa.gov/nutrientpollution/sources-and-solutions-wastewater

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were lower than in any other reporting period since 2003 despite a continued increase in the region's population.[37] This can largely be attributed to the substantial investment in upgrades required by the Great Bay Total Nitrogen Permit, issued by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 1, the primary regulation for nitrogen discharge from wastewater plants.

On the other hand, regulating septic systems can be challenging with limited state oversight. It is widely recognized that these systems are a significant non-point source of nutrient loading. According to PREP's SOOE Report, non-point sources of nitrogen between 2017 to 2020 accounted for 78% of the total nitrogen load to Great Bay.[38]

Current and future wastewater planning considerations include upgrading infrastructure to continue compliance with nitrogen permit requirements, maintaining adequate treatment capacity, and evaluating future system demand as the region grows.[39]

Dams

Dams are an important component of the region's water infrastructure and reflect the historical significance of rivers to the development of southeastern New Hampshire. The region contains approximately 52 active dams. Dams provide a range of public uses and benefits, but they can also present structural, environmental, and public safety risks. Additionally, evaluating dam condition in the context of impacts of flooding and high-quality aquatic habitats remains a priority.[40]

In 2026, officials began removing the Gonic Dam in Rochester, NH and the Mill Pond Dam in Durham, NH

Existing and Emerging Threats

Commented [LW10]: Should data centers be mentioned here?

Drinking water and wastewater infrastructure are vulnerable to natural hazards and human-caused incidents that can disrupt normal operations. These disruptions can have wide-ranging impacts on communities, from reduced water availability for firefighting to interruptions in public sanitation services. Groundwater can also be contaminated when chemicals or other substances are spilled or discharged to the ground. Liquids can flow through

[37] https://stateofourestuaries.org/indicators/nitrogen-loading/
[38] ibid
[39] https://straffordrpcnh.gov/uploads/documents/plans/rpc/regionalplan_localsolutions_2015.pdf
[40] LocalSolutions2015

the ground into groundwater, and both solids and liquids can be flushed downward by rain and snowmelt. Once contaminants reach groundwater, they often move along with the groundwater flow.[41] Emerging threats, including per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) and higher salinity levels due to groundwater rise in coastal areas, present additional challenges that continue to be studied.

Neither water and wastewater treatment plants, nor drinking water supplies have unlimited capacity. As the region's population changes and grows, communities may need to evaluate opportunities to improve system interconnectivity, expand capacity where appropriate, identify alternative water supplies, and reduce water consumption.[42]

Demographic Trends

Strafford Regional Planning Commission's 18 municipalities are home to a growing population. Rochester, Dover, Somersworth, Durham, and Newmarket are the most densely populated towns within the Strafford MPO. Between 2000 and 2010, the Strafford Region had the fastest growing population in the state of New Hampshire, at a rate of 10.9% over that decade.[43] From 2010 to 2020, the region saw a 6.3% increase in population. From 2020 to 2030, according to the New Hampshire Office of Planning and Development (OPD), the region is projected to see a 7.5% increase in population.[44]

Commented [MP11]: Need to consider if this is needed as a separate section or fold in throughout….

Commented [MP12R11]: I think this is fine to have as a separate section. We have it as a separate section in the CEDS and I think it works as a good place to point back to in the below sections

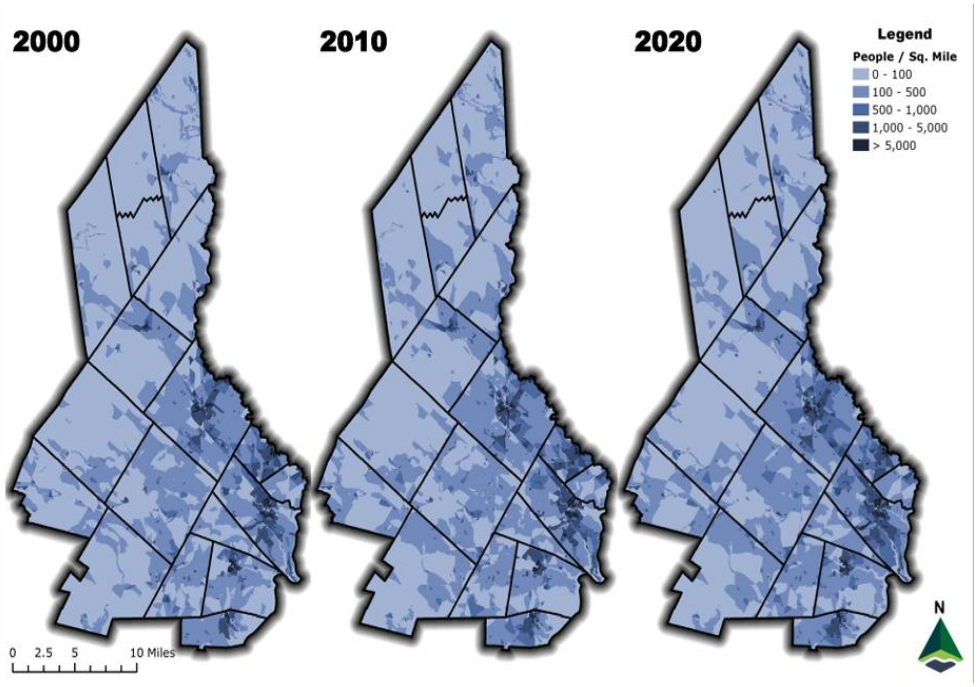
Commented [MP13R11]: @Michael Polizzotti continue work here

Commented [LW14]: some sort of transition to this section may be helpful

[41] https://www.des.nh.gov/sites/g/files/ehbemt341/files/documents/wd-24-02.pdf
[42] LocalSolutions2015
[43] Pg. 31 LocalSolutions2015
[44] Pg. 11 datasnapshot_2026.pdf

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Population Density



The median age is increasing in 14 out of the 18 SRPC communities. As of 2024, 25% of Strafford Region is 60 years or older, the fastest growing age group in the region. Those 29 years old or younger comprise roughly 37% of the region's population, comprised in part by a high number of 18–24-year-olds in UNH-Durham area.[45] A rising median age links to a rising number of people with disabilities. In 2024, about 13% of SRPC's total population had disabilities, particularly in the municipalities located in Carroll County where 18% of residents live with disabilities.[46] Overall, over 75% of NH seniors live in rural or suburban areas, making easier access to healthcare and other services in these areas an increasing necessity in the coming years.

[45] Pg. 18 datasnapshot_2026.pdf
[46] Pg. 24 datasnapshot_2026.pdf

Although population growth is slowing, development in Southeast New Hampshire is also influenced by growth within New England. Employment opportunities in major urban centers in Massachusetts and Maine will continue to draw residents into the region and influence the number of people traveling to, from, and within the region.

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RPC Partners and Initiatives

SRPC works with many partners in the region to advance land use and environmental planning. These include, for example...

New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services

New Hampshire Department of Transportation

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Vision, Themes, and Lenses

Through analysis of the relevant data and existing regional conditions, demographic and population projections for the future, and feedback gathered, the Regional Plan Subcommittee worked with SRPC staff over the course of several months to develop a comprehensive vision for land use and the environment in the Stafford Region.

Vision Statement:

The Strafford Region will be a place where communities collaborate to align expected growth, infrastructure investment, and natural systems protection to support a resilient environment, accommodate housing needs, and ensure a high quality of life.

The Regional Plan Subcommittee and SRPC staff identified four themes and corresponding goal statements that collectively support the vision for land use and the environment in the region.

Theme 1: Community Education and Engagement

Goal Statement: To improve the shared understanding of environmental stewardship; increase public participation in land use decisions; and strengthen relationships among residents, municipal decision makers, partner organizations, and other regional stakeholders to ensure that the implementation of regional priorities carry consensus and support.

This will be accomplished by raising awareness through clear and accessible communication techniques and meaningful engagement opportunities for residents to learn and contribute to.

Theme 2: Balanced Housing and Growth

Goal Statement: To guide growth towards areas with adequate infrastructure that can support higher densities and provide a wider range of housing choices for individuals of all incomes, household types, and life stages.

This will be accomplished by supporting the removal of unnecessary housing barriers, developing innovative and flexible land use regulations that encourage redevelopment and

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infill, and strengthening environmental controls that protect important natural resources and preserve community character.

Theme 3: Resilient Infrastructure

Goal Statement: To ensure that public and private infrastructure is designed, constructed, and maintained to support existing and projected growth and protect public health and natural resources against future environmental uncertainty.

This will be accomplished by supporting long-term infrastructure investments in drinking water, wastewater, stormwater, and other systems required to meet community needs.

Theme 4: Conservation and Recreation

Goal Statement: To protect the natural environment, including open spaces, waterways, and working landscapes, and provide inclusive opportunities for residents and visitors to responsibly experience and enjoy them.

This will be accomplished by investing in land protection efforts, supporting planning initiatives that balance conservation and recreation, guiding growth away from environmentally sensitive areas, and strengthening the connections between people, communities, and the natural environment.

In addition to the above themes, four lenses were identified as overarching principles that will impact the themes. These lenses are consistent with the *2026-2030 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)* and the *2026-2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP).*

Regional Partnerships and Collaboration

Strengthening regional and intercommunity relationships that advance shared priorities and look to the future; including land management and stewardship, conservation and resource protection, housing and infrastructure needs, and recreation. Fostering ongoing coordination, communication, regionalization, and inclusive engagement among municipalities, local boards and commissions, stakeholders, and residents to ensure regional planning is informed by all necessary community voices.

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Resiliency and Future Readiness

Supporting a region that is equipped for change, prepared for risk, and committed to the long-term viability of land, diverse alternative energy, infrastructure, and natural resources. Encouraging conscious development patterns and investment decisions that reduce vulnerability, preserve regional assets for future use, and position the region to adapt to evolving environmental conditions, demographic and cultural shifts, and economic uncertainty.

Quality of Life and Community Identity

Preserving and enhancing the unique natural, historic, cultural, and recreational assets that define the region's character and support high quality of life. Supporting decisions that maintain access to open space and waterways, strengthen downtowns and village centers, promote outdoor recreation, and protect the features that make the region vibrant, livable, and welcoming for present and future enjoyment.

Age Friendliness

Promoting initiatives that support residents of all ages by encouraging and adapting civic engagement opportunities, applying locally tailored solutions to enhance accessible housing, public spaces, and community amenities. Supporting regional planning that facilitates aging in place, improves access to services and recreation, utilizes connections and actions from the Age-Friendly Resource Guide and Action Plans, and strengthens social and physical connections for changing demographics.

The following sections of the Land Use and Environment chapter are centered on the four thematic areas. Each discusses relevant data, trends, and research highlighting conditions and practices in these areas, along with specific objectives that support the goals and vision.

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Community Engagement and Education

Commented [MP15]: How to combat misinformation, communicating in a digital age, etc.

Effective land use and environmental planning relies upon informed and engaged community members and decision makers, so that decisions are guided by best available information and community support. Strengthening engagement and education related to the environment is increasingly important, as both connectedness to nature[47] and civic engagement[48] have been declining. While land use and environmental decisions are made locally, many of their effects extend across municipal boundaries. A regional perspective is required due to the interconnectedness of housing, natural resources, water systems, and changing environmental conditions.

Understanding Regional Choices

Residents and local decision makers need access to clear, trusted information about conditions affecting their communities and the choices available to address them. Decisions about land use, environmental protections, and regulations can be complex and technical, and involve tradeoffs that can be challenging to navigate. The region benefits from having an abundance of partners with technical expertise related to environmental resources, as well as assistance providers who can help translate technical data into actionable information. A key component is making sure all of the municipalities in the region, particularly those with less staff capacity, have access to these resources and opportunities.

Meaningful and Accessible Public Participation

In New Hampshire communities, many decisions related to land use and the environment are made at the municipal level, with volunteer boards and committees meeting regularly to guide planning and decision-making. Members of these boards dedicate substantial time and expertise to their roles. A common challenge, particularly in smaller communities, is filling positions on these committees and having membership that represents the breadth of the community. For example, younger residents, renters, and new residents may not be aware of these opportunities to participate or may not see these themselves as being able to access these roles. According to the 2024 New

[47] DJ Case and Associates. (2017). *Time Spent in Nature*.
[48] Moore-Vissing, Q., Portrie, C., Sarup, H., and Holt-Shannon, M. (2024). *2024 New Hampshire Civic Health Report.* Carsey Publications. 492. https://scholars.unh.edu/carsey/492

Hampshire Civic Health Report, 12% of Granite Staters attended a public meeting in the past 12 months, down from 19% in 2019. While higher than the national average (8%), this is still a relatively small percentage of people who have engaged in a public meeting.

Technology can be leveraged for engagement benefits, such as enabling remote participation for meetings and using electronic communications and social media to provide updates about upcoming meetings and opportunities to participate. However, online spaces can also be ripe with misinformation so must be approached with caution. Additionally, the recent growth of artificial intelligence can result in information that appears legitimate and official, but is not.

In addition to the accessibility of participation, ensuring that input meaningfully impacts decisions is critical. People want to see that their time and input is valued. While capacity constraints may limit the amount and types of outreach and engagement activities that can be supported, providing clarity on the role of participation in a given project or decision is helpful for rightsizing expectations and building trust. The International Association for Public Participation offers the Spectrum of Public Participation, outlining the distinctions in engagement from inform and consult to involve, collaborate, and empower.[49] All of these levels of participation have a role to play.

Relationships and Action

The 2024 New Hampshire Civic Health Report emphasizes the importance of relationships in fostering a sense of belonging and mattering in communities, which can contribute to engagement. There are numerous partners in the region working to support and expand engagement and participation in planning and decision-making, especially related to natural resources and the environment. SRPC often partners with municipalities on grant-funded projects and provides capacity to support engagement activities. The Great Bay Changemaker Bootcamp program provides education, skill-building, and networking to support participants to more actively participate in their communities. This program has supported individuals to join a local conservation commission and the Cocheco River Local Advisory Committee, for example. Other groups, such as the Municipal Alliance for Adaptive Management, Coastal Conservation Roundtable, NH Coastal Adaptation

Commented [LW16]: Previous notes to come back to
Municipal staff and volunteers often have limited time, coordination, Civic learning, youth participation, and volunteer opportunities, etc., etc.
SRPC coordinator

[49] International Association for Public Participation. (2024). Spectrum of Public Participation.

Workgroup, and others, support coordination and sharing of lessons learned between municipalities, which is helpful to address shared challenges and avoid reinventing the wheel. Partners like 7 Rivers to the Coast and Nature Groupie amplify volunteer opportunities, especially related to natural resources and stewardship. SRPC and other partners have also worked with K-12 schools in the region and the University of New Hampshire to foster connections between students and municipal actions.

Goal Statement

To improve the shared understanding of environmental stewardship; increase public participation in land use decisions; and strengthen relationships among residents, municipal decision makers, partner organizations, and other regional stakeholders to ensure that the implementation of regional priorities carry consensus and support.

This will be accomplished by raising awareness through clear and accessible communication techniques and meaningful engagement opportunities for residents to learn and contribute to.

Objectives and Strategic Direction

- Improve public and local stakeholder access to clear, relevant information about regional land use and environmental conditions, choices, and tradeoffs.
- Create accessible and meaningful opportunities for residents of different ages, backgrounds, and abilities to inform local and regional planning.
- Show how community input is considered and maintain opportunities for participation as plans move toward implementation.
- Strengthen the relationships among municipalities, boards, schools, libraries, community organizations, and regional partners to share knowledge and increase capacity.
- Support learning, volunteering, and responsible stewardship that help residents take part in caring for their communities and natural resources.

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Balanced Housing and Growth

The Strafford Region needs a greater variety of housing choices, but opportunities to accommodate new development vary considerably among communities. Some areas may be well suited for infill development, redevelopment, or the reuse of existing buildings that are near municipal services and infrastructure. In other locations, limited water and wastewater capacity, sensitive natural resources, and the cost of extending or developing infrastructure may constrain opportunities for growth. These differences highlight the importance of considering housing needs at both the regional and local levels.

Throughout the Forward-Thinking outreach and engagement process, the need to balance housing demand with the preservation of community character was a common thread. Nearly three-quarters of respondents to a regionwide survey ~~respondents~~ identified housing costs and availability as challenges facing the region. At the same time, many expressed the importance of considering where development occurs, the infrastructure and services available to support it, and the potential impacts on natural resources.

This topic is also referenced in many municipal master plans throughout the region. Rural communities have always placed a strong emphasis on the importance of environmental protection, while more recently, residents in some of the more urbanized areas have raised questions about the extent to which they should be responsible for addressing the regional housing needs on their own. In Dover, these voices have become louder in response to the use of innovative land use controls, such as the transfer of development rights, in some of the city's more rural areas.

The recently adopted 2026-2030 CEDS identifies housing supply as a regional challenge. The most recent Regional Housing Needs Assessment for the Strafford Region estimated that 9,520 additional housing units are needed between 2020 to 2040. While progress has been made in recent years to address this need, additional housing remains necessary.

While housing demand is a shared regional challenge, development opportunities and constraints vary considerably among communities, making a uniform approach unlikely to be effective. As state legislation continues to establish new housing-related requirements that may limit local land use flexibility, SRPC can provide a collaborative, advisory role by helping

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communities better understand projected housing demand, share information, and consider strategies that reflect their individual needs and local priorities. This approach supports municipal decision-making while respecting local control.

Housing Choices Across Life Stages

Housing needs and preferences change as individuals and families move through different stages of life. Young adults entering the housing market, growing families, and older residents looking to downsize or to simply age in place may all require different housing options. A healthy, diverse housing stock can help ensure that residents at different incomes levels, ages, and stages of live have opportunities to find housing that meets their needs and allows them to remain connected to their communities.

Across SRPC's outreach efforts, respondents highlighted challenges associated with aging in place, including limited public transportation and a lack of convenient connections between homes, businesses, and services in many parts of the region. Participants emphasized the importance of housing options that allow residents to downsize, accommodate multi-generational household lifestyles, and remain close to healthcare and community activities. These needs extend across generations. Younger adults, families, individuals caring for a parent, older residents, and people with disabilities can all benefit from a greater variety of housing types, walkable neighborhoods, and access to everyday services and amenities.

Expanding housing choices will require increasing the supply and variety of housing types, including smaller homes, accessory dwelling units (ADUs), duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, townhomes, cottage courts, and other small multi-family buildings. Often referred to as "missing middle" housing, these options generally include attached and detached housing types that fall between conventional single-family homes and large apartment buildings in terms of size and density. They can provide more attainable housing options through "gentle density," which spreads land costs across more units without requiring the space, circulation areas, or infrastructure associated with large apartment developments. Small unit sizes can also reduce construction costs by requiring less construction materials.[50]

[50] NH Housing Toolbox: Missing Middle Housing Type.
https://nhhousingtoolbox.org/strategies/missing-middle-housing-types/

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These housing types can provide modest increases in density, particularly in existing developed areas where infrastructure and services can support additional growth; however, local land use regulations need to be aligned to promote these development options. For example, zoning ordinances and subdivision regulations should provide enough flexibility to encourage the creative pursuit of missing middle housing but also a clear framework that protects natural resources and neighboring properties. This includes removing unnecessary regulatory barriers related to permitted uses, minimum lot sizes, and parking requirements, while maintaining standards that address building scale and massing, setbacks, landscaping and screening, and overall site and building design.

Location and Utilizing Existing Built Places

Commented [LW17]: should this say 'locating'?

Guiding new development towards areas that are already developed was a strong preference expressed throughout the outreach process, with nearly three-quarters of survey respondents favoring this approach. A regional audit of local master plans also identified a common emphasis on investing in downtowns and village centers, reusing existing buildings, and supporting infill and redevelopment. These priorities are consistent with the region's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), which recognizes that areas with existing infrastructure and other built assets are better positioned to support growth. Focusing development in appropriate locations is a more efficient and sustainable use of land, infrastructure, and public investments; connects residents with services and community assets; and reduces the impacts associated with sprawl. Reusing historic buildings and existing commercial properties can also help maintain local identity and support established community and social centers.

Several communities in the region that have been recognized as "Housing Champions"[51] have identified opportunities to direct additional development towards existing built-up areas through their local planning efforts. Dover emphasizes infill and redevelopment in areas with existing infrastructure; Farmington promotes additional housing and mixed uses to its Village Center; and Newmarket has identified its downtown and gateway areas as priorities for investment. Many local master plans also recognize the importance of

[51] https://www.nheconomy.com/housing-champion-program

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balancing growth in these areas with the protection of surrounding rural and natural areas.

However, the presence of existing development or infrastructure does not necessarily mean that an area can accommodate additional density. Opportunities for infill and redevelopment depend on site conditions, the capacity and condition of water and wastewater systems, the availability of sidewalks and other municipal infrastructure, and long-term costs associated with providing public services. Safe pedestrian and bicycle connections, access to schools and community facilities, and public transportation are also important considerations.

SRPC's Metropolitan Transportation Plan highlights tools such as the Pedestrian Level of Traffic Street analyses that can help communities identify connectivity gaps and plan for capital improvements. The plan also recognizes the role of denser, mixed-use developed in supporting transit services such as COAST and UNH Wildcat, which connect residents, employees, and students to destinations across the region.

Development That Fits the Setting

Housing should be planned to complement the natural and built environments of the places where it occurs. Local master plans throughout the region highlight the importance of connecting development with the protection of water resources, forested lands, and community character. Identifying appropriate locations for housing is only part of this goal; how development is designed and constructed also influences its effects on surrounding lands, resources, and established neighborhoods.

Community character is often thought of as the qualities and features that give place its identity. These may include a walkable village center, historic buildings, working farms, forested landscapes, and other valued local assets. Identifying and understanding these attributes can help communities evaluate how proposed development fits within its surroundings and establish clearer priorities through master planning, zoning, and other land use regulations.

Infill, adaptive reuse, conservation design, and compact development can help communities meet housing needs while reducing the conversion and fragmentation of undeveloped lands. Development design should also consider the specific resources present on the site that are intended to be protected. For example, the total amount of open space retained within a

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development does not necessarily indicate whether the site's resources were adequately protected. The location and configuration of the open space matters, particularly when considering riparian and wetland buffers, groundwater recharge areas, wildlife habitat connections, or productive farmland. Site design should also address how development relates to surrounding properties and neighborhoods through measures such as landscaping and appropriate screening. These considerations are essential when proposing new land use regulations that would allow greater density into established residential areas, where concerns about compatibility with the surrounding neighborhood may influence public support for new development.

Thoughtful site planning can help ensure that development accommodates housing, while limiting impacts to natural systems and preserving community features that contribute to the region's overall quality of life.

Goal Statement

To guide growth towards areas with adequate infrastructure that can support higher densities and provide a wider range of housing choices for individuals of all incomes, household types, and life stages.

This will be accomplished by supporting the removal of unnecessary housing barriers, developing innovative and flexible land use regulations that encourage redevelopment and infill, and strengthening environmental controls that protect important natural resources and preserve community character.

Objectives and Strategic Direction

- Expand the range of housing types and price points available to residents across incomes, household types, and life stages.
- Support housing and neighborhoods that allow people of different ages and abilities to remain connected to services, community activities, and one another.
- Help municipalities identify and address land use and regulatory barriers that limit appropriate housing choices, including smaller homes and multi-family housing.
- Prioritize infill, redevelopment, and adaptive reuse in locations where existing or planned infrastructure and services can support it.
- Guide housing and development in ways that protect sensitive natural resources, maintain valued community features, and avoid unnecessary land consumption.

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Resilient Infrastructure

Commented [MP18]: Another completely reworked section with new subthemes, goal statement, and subgoals

Infrastructure shapes whether and how communities can respond to demands for growth. Infrastructure systems including drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater, require long-term investments. Availability and capacity of these systems vary widely across communities in the Strafford Region. Planning for the future requires consideration of both the built infrastructure and the natural systems that help protect water quality and other attributes.

While nearly three-quarters of respondents to the regionwide survey favored new development in areas with existing development in order to preserve undeveloped areas, many fewer respondents were supportive of investments to build new infrastructure. Conversations with municipal officials and board members identified the cost and availability of utilities as significant constraints to development as well. These findings indicate that additional work is needed to more clearly identify investments that are necessary to support desired development patterns, maintain existing services, and protect environmental resources.

Infrastructure Capacity and Investment

Communities throughout the region depend on infrastructure that must be operated, maintained, repaired, and eventually replaced. Decisions surrounding growth and development need to consider infrastructure condition, the available capacity these systems have, and the cost of providing services like water and sewer over time. The location of water and sewer lines does not fully establish where additional development can be supported. Available capacity and supply in a system, treatment capacity, and the condition and age of systems are all factors. In the region's cities and in communities such as Durham, Farmington, and Newmarket, existing water and sewer systems are discussed as opportunities for focused development. Many communities in the region rely on smaller systems, private wells, and septic systems.

Sustainable development that reflects the community's vision requires identification of preferred locations for development combined with strategic capital investment planning to support the utilities needed. This involves consideration of rates and connection fees to support adequate resources for long-term maintenance and upgrades. With a resilience lens, both the location of and capital planning for these infrastructure systems should incorporate

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future conditions. Rising sea levels and groundwater levels, more frequent freeze-thaw events, and warmer temperatures can impact infrastructure degradation through exposure to the elements. More intense rain events can impact capacity for stormwater infrastructure, as well as drinking water resources as stormwater runoff increases. On the other hand, drought puts stress on public and private drinking water resources and can contribute to the accumulation and movement of contaminants, such as PFAS.[52] Planning for increased growth in communities must integrate planning for drinking water supply, both quantity and quality.

In addition to water and wastewater, solid waste planning must also consider facility capacity, efficient collection and management, and opportunities for waste reduction, recycling, and composting. Communities in the Strafford Region use a variety of approaches to solid waste management, including municipal transfer stations, regional recycling centers, and private services. There are currently 21 operating solid waste facilities permitted by NHDES in the region. Several landfill locations have been leveraged to produce energy resources, including the solar projects on capped landfills in Somersworth and Milton, and the Turnkey Landfill Gas Recovery facility in Rochester, operated by Waste Management. Additionally, the Tolend Landfill Superfund Site in Dover has long-term cleanup work underway to protect the Bellamy Reservoir.[53]

All of these systems together are critical to sustaining existing development and shape the constraints and opportunities for future growth.

Water Quality and Natural Systems

Water quality and the reliability and performance of infrastructure are connected to the ways that surrounding land is used and managed. Drinking water concerns emerged as key concerns during the outreach efforts for Forward Thinking. These concerns extend beyond municipal utility customers and include areas that rely on private wells and septic systems. Furthermore, contamination concerns, including PFAS, highlight the importance of coordinating with the appropriate agencies and connecting residents with reliable testing and assistance information. Land use decisions around drinking

[52] Liang, M., Kabiri, S., McLaughlin, M. J., and Navarro, D. (2026). Migration of Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances in Soil Under Rainfall Simulation. *CLEAN – Soil, Air, Water, 54(4).*
[53] City of Dover, NH. Tolend Landfill Superfund Site.

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water sources will need to consider activities that may affect water quality or place additional demands on supply.

Protecting source waters is extremely important for maintaining water quality downstream.

Planning for Future Conditions

Need to add the following to this subsection:

- infrastructure investments need to account for conditions over the life of an asset… climate changes, hazard mit
- general hazard mit discussion here
- coordination planning land use and hazard mit and cap planning
- energy efficiency

Goal Statement

To ensure that public and private infrastructure is designed, constructed, and maintained to support existing and projected growth and protect public health and natural resources against future environmental uncertainty.

This will be accomplished by supporting long-term infrastructure investments in drinking water, wastewater, stormwater, and other systems required to meet community needs.

Objectives and Strategic Direction

- Maintain and improve essential water, wastewater, stormwater, and solid waste systems to meet current needs and protect public health and environmental quality.
- Assess infrastructure capacity and long-term costs when identifying locations for future growth and investment.
- Protect water resources and use natural features and appropriate site designs to manage runoff, flooding, and other environmental impacts.
- Prepare essential systems for changing environmental conditions and future demands through coordinated planning and investment.
- Strengthen municipal and regional coordination and shared systems, watersheds, or costs cross community boundaries.

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Conservation and Recreation

Natural resources and outdoor recreation are closely connected and contribute to the region's character and quality of life. As referenced in the regional overview, the region currently contains approximately 67,110 acres of conservation land, representing about 19%.[54] Conservation lands help protect water resources, wildlife habitat, forests, agricultural lands, and other important natural resources. Many of these same spaces also provide opportunities for residents and visitors to recreate outdoors.

Input gathered during the outreach process indicates that survey respondents place a high value on both preserving existing open space and having recreational opportunities, such as walking paths and trails, close to home. Participants also emphasized the importance of waterways, greenspace, and connections between natural areas and community centers, village centers, and downtowns.

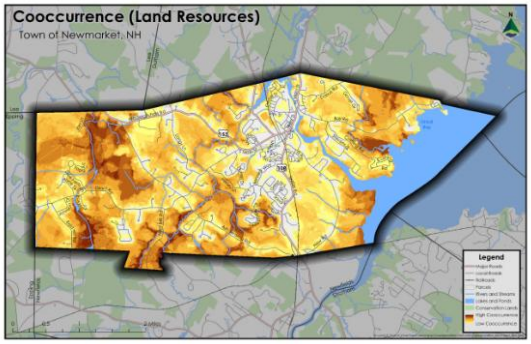
A review of local master plans further highlights the importance of considering conservation and recreation together, recognizing that protecting open space can preserve natural resources, support recreation and community character, and help guide development towards already built-up areas. However, conservation and recreation are not always compatible. Some properties may be best suited for public access and active recreation, while others may warrant a higher level of protection because of important ecological values such as sensitive habitats, drinking water supplies, and flood storage. Determining which lands should be protected, and what uses are appropriate, will require thoughtful planning at both the local and regional levels.

These decisions have last implications. Conservations easements and other permanent land protections can remove or significantly limit a property's future development potential. As such, it is important to have a planning mechanism, such as an open space master plan, conservation scoring criteria, natural resource inventories, or co-occurrence mapping,[55] to help prioritize land acquisition projects. These tools can help develop a targeted a strategic land conservation strategy by identifying areas with the greatest concentration of ecological value, exploring opportunities for connections with

[54] https://docs.straffordrpcnh.gov/documents/plans/rpc/datasnapshot_2026.pdf
[55] https://www.barringtonconcom.org/town-of-barrington-maps-links/

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surrounding protected lands, and evaluating potential impacts to a community's tax base.



Communities should also be considering whether public access is appropriate, which uses should be allowed, and have a full understanding of available funding sources used to acquire a property that could have additional requirements on its future use.

The long-term challenge for the region extends beyond just land protection efforts. It will encompass making thoughtful decisions about ongoing responsibility and stewardship, as well as balancing competing uses.

Stewardship and Responsible Recreation

Parks, trails, waterways, conservation lands, and other natural assets require ongoing care and management to remain healthy and well-maintained. Acquiring a property for protection is only the first step; long-term responsibilities can include trail and parking maintenance, signage, trash removal, and addressing encroachments or other legal and enforcement matters. Just as communities should prioritize lands based on their ecological values, they should also consider the long-term costs and management responsibilities associated with these properties.

Partnerships can help communities meet these responsibilities without placing an unreasonable obligation on municipal volunteers, including local conservation commissions and open lands committees, which often have limited funding and support. Landowners and community members can also benefit from forestry education and management guidance through UNH

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Cooperative Extension, including free county forester property visits, a directory of licensed foresters, educational publications, and field programs.[56]

Regional land trusts, including the Southeast Land Trust (SELT), Moose Mountains Regional Greenways (MMRG), and Bear-Paw Regional Greenways (BPRG), are another important resource that can bring additional capacity and expertise to conservation management. Depending on the circumstances, these organizations may acquire and manage properties through fee-simple ownership or hold conservation easements to work with municipalities and private landowners to ensure that protected lands are appropriately managed more effectively. Other potential partnerships include agencies such as NH Fish and Game Department, NH Division of Forests and Lands, Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Nature Conservancy, and the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests.

Responsible recreation and public education are also important components of stewardship. While outreach participants widely recognized that recreation can help build an appreciation for nature, overuse and conflicts among recreational users can also contribute to harmful impacts such as erosion, habitat disturbance, litter and illegal dumping, and other costly challenges. Signage about permitted uses, visible stewardship efforts, and other creative outreach techniques can help educate residents and visitors on the importance of these places and their role in protecting them.

The Town of Durham's Wagon Hill Farm Living Shoreline Project provides a good example of how a community can use a local project as an educational opportunity. Signage, a field trip video[57], and a hands-on event in which over 100 Oyster River Middle School students participated in Service Palooza at the site have all helped showcase the project and explain its environmental benefits to the public. Efforts like these demonstrate how stewardship can extend beyond the physical management of the property to include engaging residents and visitors to build broader support for conservation projects.

[56] https://extension.unh.edu/natural-resources/forests-trees
[57] https://www.nhcaw.org/project/wagon-hill-farm-living-shoreline-phase-iii/

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Conservation in Growth and Development

Contrary to popular opinion, conservation and development should not be viewed as opposing priorities. Rather, these important land use decisions should be considered together. Through careful planning, communities can accommodate growth while also protecting important natural resources, including forests, wildlife habitat, water resources, and working landscapes that contribute to their character and identity. Local master plans throughout the region acknowledge this balance in different ways. Lee emphasizes agriculture, natural resources, and rural character; Northwood connects expanded housing choices with open space design and the protection of water and habitat; and Nottingham identifies both resource protection and greater housing diversity.

Creative zoning can help translate these priorities into practice. Open space subdivisions can provide greater yield plans by clustering development and preserving areas of undeveloped land, while density bonuses for properties served by municipal water or sewer can help direct growth towards areas with existing infrastructure. Innovative land use controls allow communities to establish environmental characteristic zoning, such as groundwater, wetland, and shoreland protection overlay districts, to require additional standards for development within or proximity to sensitive areas. At the site plan level, land use regulations can encourage the preservation of existing vegetation and natural features through landscaping and screening requirements and require comprehensive stormwater management.

Together, these approaches offer ways to protect environmental resources while allowing compatible development where appropriate.

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Recreation Access and Community Connections

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Nearby recreation contributes to community quality of life and gives residents opportunities to be active, gather, and experience the outdoors. Outreach conducted for Forward thinking indicated that respondents place a high value on walking and biking opportunities close to home. Access to recreation should consider the needs of people across ages, abilities, incomes, and geographic locations, including those who face transportation or physical barriers.

More here needed about:

Determining appropriate public access and allowable activities, accessibility for different ages and abilities, trail connections (MTP), and the implications of grant requirements that may affect public access.

Goal Statement

To protect the natural environment, including open spaces, waterways, and working landscapes, and provide inclusive opportunities for residents and visitors to responsibly experience and enjoy them.

This will be accomplished by investing in land protection efforts, supporting planning initiatives that balance conservation and recreation, guiding growth away from environmentally sensitive areas, and strengthening the connections between people, communities, and the natural environment.

Objectives and Strategic Direction

- Protect vulnerable and valuable natural resources, wildlife habitat, biodiversity, water resources, agricultural lands, and other environmentally sensitive areas through land use planning, conservation, and stewardship.
- Balance conservation and recreation by identifying where public access and recreational use can be appropriately supported and where natural resources warrant greater protection.
- Maintain and improve existing parks, trails, conservation lands, and recreational facilities to support their long-term environmental health, safety, and quality.
- Integrate conservation into future growth and development through innovative planning tools and practices that protect open space, natural resources, and community character.

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- Expand access to recreational opportunities for people of all ages and abilities, with particular attention to underserved areas and changing community needs.
- Strengthen partnerships and pursue funding opportunities that increase regional and local capacity to conserve, operate, maintain, and improve natural and recreational assets.

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Implementation Strategies and Actions

- LUE Draft Action Items.xlsx [in progress]

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The Bridge Executive Summary

SRPC Regional Plan Forward Thinking

(First page to be replaced with PDF cover)

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Acknowledgements

SRPC Commissioners

The primary responsibility of the Commissioners is to act as the governing body that guides the work of the Strafford Regional Planning Commission both broadly as an organization and as a Regional Planning Commission as established under NH RSA 36. In its overarching organization governance role, commissioners are responsible for adopting and amending the Bylaws, the Annual Budget, and Municipal Dues. Acting as the Regional Planning Commission, responsibilities include setting planning policies for the region through discussions at meetings, providing input for staff reports, and by adopting reports and position statements.

Regional Plan Subcommittee

The Regional Plan Subcommittee is made up of a subset of Commissioners to provide additional input, guidance, and review of the components of ***Forward Thinking: A Comprehensive Plan for the Strafford Region***.

Strafford EDD Strategy Committee

The Strategy Committee provides guidance to the Strafford EDD in the development of the CEDS. It represents diverse perspectives from the Strafford Region including local municipalities, public transportation, chambers of commerce, public and private financing, healthcare, housing, social services, education and technical training, planning, and state and federal economic development perspectives. In addition to providing technical input to the CEDS document and its Priority Project list, the Strategy Committee contributes perspectives on the strengths, opportunities, constraints; provides input on economic trends; and provides an opportunity for collaboration, leadership, and program development. Additionally, the Committee strengthens coordination among local, regional, and sector-based partners; and communicates regional needs and opportunities to other stakeholders.

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Strafford EDD Board of Directors

The full body of the Strafford Regional Planning Commission as determined by RSA 36:46, in addition to a representative from the Strafford Economic Development Corporation, serves as the Strafford EDD Board of Directors. The Strafford EDD Board of Directors is responsible for approving the final CEDS based on input from SRPC staff, the Strategy Committee, and the public.

Strafford MPO Technical Advisory Committee

The Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) provides the Strafford MPO with technical assistance and recommendations concerning transportation issues that have a bearing on the Strafford MPO's continued, comprehensive, and coordinated transportation planning process. The TAC will review and make recommendations to the Strafford MPO Policy Committee on transportation planning efforts in the Strafford MPO.

Strafford MPO Policy Committee

The appointed representatives of the Strafford Regional Planning Commission also serve a separate role as members of the Policy Committee in fulfilling the function of the Strafford MPO. The purpose of the Policy Committee shall be to provide a public decision-making forum for the development and implementation of transportation policies and policies for the Strafford MPO region. Commissioners serve on the Policy Committee and represent their municipalities in regional transportation decisions. The Policy Committee is responsible for carrying out the metropolitan transportation planning process as required by federal statute (23 CFR part 450). This responsibility is carried out through oversight of the Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) and through the development, review and approval of the Prospectus, the Metropolitan Transportation Plan, the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), and the Air Quality Conformity Determination.

The Strafford Regional Planning Commission extends thanks to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), United States Economic Development Administration (EDA), United States Department of Transportation (DOT), and the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation (NHCF) for the funding that supported the update to this comprehensive regional plan.

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Forward Thinking Executive Summary

Forward Thinking: A Comprehensive Plan for the Strafford Region is a resource that compiles the several of the region's long-term plans and planning efforts for economic development (2026-2030 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy of CEDS), transportation (2026–2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan or MTP), land use and the environment (Regional Plan or LUE chapter), and climate adaption and mitigation (Climate chapter). This collection of plans outlines the shared priorities for a region that is growing and changing, while also the unique differences, priorities, preferences, and capacities of the 18 municipalities that make up the Strafford Regional Planning Commission region.

The four planning components outlined in the preceding paragraph were developed through analyses of regional and local conditions and projections, reviews of the local master plans from each of the region's municipalities, public outreach and input, engagement with municipal boards and staff, and perspectives from other regional partners and stakeholders. Each of these four plans share a common structure that includes tailored vision statement, themes, goals, and four overarching lenses.

Forward Thinking Vision for the Region

The four components of ***Forward Thinking*** each have vision statements that highlight the importance of connected, vibrant, and resilient communities that meet the needs of their residents, are prepared for chance, and have high quality of life. Collectively, the components of *Forward Thinking* support a comprehensive vision for the region.

The Strafford Region will be a thriving, welcoming, and resilient place where communities work together to provide diverse housing choices, a strong regional economy, accessible transportation, and well-planned infrastructure while protecting the natural and cultural resources that define the region.

Through thoughtful growth, coordinated investment, and opportunities for public participation, residents of all ages and abilities will be able to live, work, travel, and enjoy a high quality of life. The region will be prepared to respond to changing economic,

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demographic, and environmental conditions and to build on its strengths for future generations.

This vision recognizes the unique character, resources and opportunities, and diverse communities that make up the Strafford Region and is supported by the visions, lenses, themes, goals, and objectives across the four components of ***Forward Thinking***.

Future Regional Priorities

Through analysis of the four components of ***Forward Thinking***, the following regional priorities have been identified. These are discussed in further detail at the end of this plan, after the summaries of each plan component.

Future priorities for the region include:

- Accommodating housing needs and thoughtfully guiding growth.
- Strengthening the regional economy and workforce.
- Improving access, safety, and transportation options
- Protecting natural resources and promoting stewardship and responsible recreation.
- Preparing infrastructure communities, and people for a changing climate.
- Strengthening public participation, civic engagement, and regional partnerships.

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Introduction to the Planning Commission

Established by state legislation in 1969, regional planning commissions operate as political subdivisions of the state and serve in an advisory role to local governments and organizations in accordance with RSA 36:45-58. Among their mandated functions are the preparation and maintenance of a regional master plan, a regional housing needs assessment, and the review of projects of regional impact.

The Strafford Regional Planning Commission (SRPC) is one of nine regional planning commissions in New Hampshire and is composed of 18 municipalities, including all of Strafford County; Newmarket, Nottingham, and Northwood in Rockingham County; and Brookfield and Wakefield in Carroll County.

SRPC works to ensure that the region is responsive to the needs of its residents and member communities through three primary roles: as a Regional Planning Commission (RPC), a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), and an Economic Development District (EDD).

Regional Planning Commission

The Regional Planning Commission (RPC) is governed by Commissioners appointed by their respective municipal governments. The Commissioners are responsible for setting high-level planning policies for the region and addressing a variety of topics, including transportation, land use, housing, economic development, climate adaptation and resilience, emergency management and hazard mitigation, public health, and natural resource protection.

Under their guidance, SRPC's professional staff provide general planning services and technical support to member communities, including data collection and mapping analysis; graphic design and marketing; outreach and engagement; municipal master plans, planning studies, and land use regulations; as well as grant writing and project management.

Data Analysis and GIS

Data analysis, collection, and GIS are key components of SRPC's regional planning and technical assistance work. Through the collection and analysis of demographic, economic, land use, transportation, infrastructure, and natural

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resources data and trends, SRPC is able to inform municipalities and regional partners and improve understanding of existing conditions, potential opportunities, and support planning and investment decisions.

SRPC maintains a comprehensive set of standardized municipal maps, interactive mapping and data tools, and analyses on topics including development patters, transportation networks and safety, infrastructure, conservations, water resources, and more. In addition to project-specific data and mapping related work, a yearly Data Snapshot publication compiles over 160 metrics across topics including demographics, economic vitality, housing, livability and quality of life, mobility and accessibility, and resiliency. The 2026 Data Snapshot serves as a key source of information throughout Forward Thinking.

Regional Housing Needs Assessment

Each of the state's regional planning commissioners are responsible to prepare and maintain a Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA) as outlined by RSA 36:47. The RHNA includes a thorough analysis of housing needs across income levels and covers topics including the region's housing supply, affordability, household characteristics, and projected demand across individual municipalities. In 2023, SRPC completed the latest RHNA for the Strafford Region. The 2023 RHNA estimated a projected need of 9,520 additional housing unites between 2020 and 2040 to meet housing demand fueled by population and employment growth.

Metropolitan Planning Organization

A Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) is a federally designated organization that functions as a transportation policy decision-making body in urbanized areas of 50,000 or more. As one of four MPOs in New Hampshire, the Strafford MPO supports regional transportation planning by maintaining the Metropolitan Transportation Plan and Transportation Improvement Program, ensuring compliance with air quality requirements, and representing local planning priorities at the state level. The MPO works in partnership with the New Hampshire Department of Transportation in developing the state Ten-Year Plan and engages the public in transportation planning in a transparent through an open and transparent process.

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Economic Development District

In 2015, the Strafford Region was designated as an Economic Development District (EDD) by the U.S. Economic Development Administration. An EDD is responsible for maintaining and implementing a regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). The Strafford EDD's CEDS establishes a regional strategy for economic development and prosperity. The Strafford EDD completes annual updates to the CEDS, a comprehensive update every five years, and provides technical assistance to communities to promote economic development in the region. The EDD also undertakes efforts that help advance the goals and priorities identified in the CEDS. The Strafford EDD comprises the municipalities of Strafford County plus Brookfield and Wakefield in Carroll County. Newmarket, Northwood, and Nottingham are part of the EDD operated by the Regional Economic Development Center (REDC) headquartered in Raymond, NH.

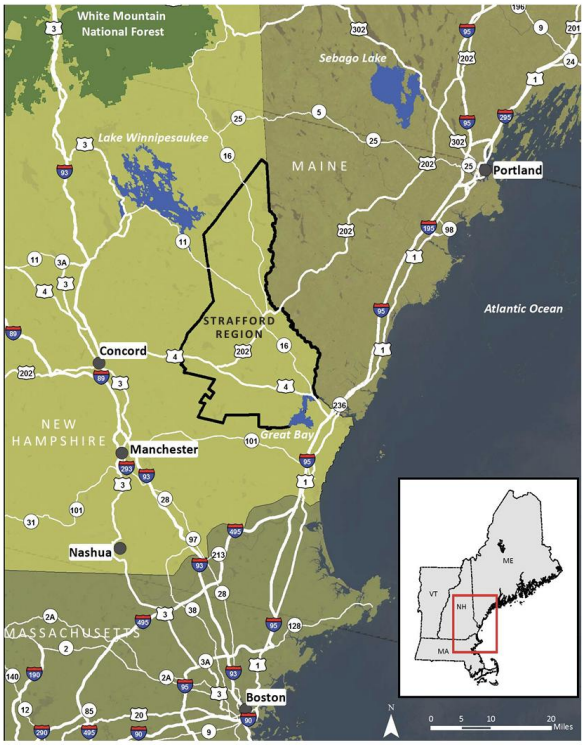
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The Strafford Region

Geographic Overview

The Strafford region is in the southeastern corner of New Hampshire where the Salmon Falls River flows south along the region's eastern edge before joining the Piscataqua River, forming the boundary with Maine. The region extends from Rockingham County to the south, to Carroll County in the north, and is bordered by Belknap and Merrimack Counties to the west. Its location is roughly equidistant to the metropolitan areas of Boston (MA) and Portland (ME), approximately 60 miles from each.

[map of region, similar to one below].



The Strafford region is uniquely located between several distinct geographic areas. The Lakes Region lies to the north, known for its more than 273 lakes and ponds, including Lake Winnipesaukee, and its strong tourism and recreational economy. To the south, the Atlantic Seacoast Region follows New Hampshire's eighteen-mile ocean coastline, with beaches, historic downtowns, and the distinctive character of its coastal communities. To the west, the Merrimack Valley is anchored by the state capital and its three largest cities – Concord, Nashua, and Manchester – and by Interstate 93, the region's primary

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north-south transportation corridor connecting New Hampshire and Massachusetts and supporting significant economic activity and opportunity.

Generally, the southern portion of the region benefits from its proximity to the employment centers of the Boston metropolitan area and the Seacoast, while communities to the north and west have strong connections to the recreational resources of the Lakes Region and White Mountain National Forest.

The region is recognized for its natural resources, diverse urban and rural communities, and rich cultural heritage. The region is home to Dover, Rochester, and Somersworth, collectively known as the Tri-Cities – as well as Durham, home to the University of New Hampshire, a significant employment center and flagship campus of the University System of New Hampshire.

Most communities in the Strafford region lie within the Piscataqua River Basin. Five coastal rivers flow through the region before converging in Great Bay, a National Estuarine Research Reserve. From Great Bay, the Piscataqua River carries water east through Portsmouth Harbor and into the Gulf of Maine.

The Strafford region is also rooted in a rich industrial history. During the Industrial Revolution, the region developed as an important hub of textile production, with mill communities growing along the Cochecho, Lamprey, Salmon Falls, and Oyster rivers. These waterways provided both the power and transportation connections that supported the growth of the region's traditional mill towns and shaped development patterns that remain evident today.

Regional Demographics and Projections

Both population and demographic changes along with changing household needs impact the region's demand for housing, transportation, local services, and infrastructure. The region's population grew by 6.3% from 2010 to 2020 and is projected by the New Hampshire Office of Planning and Development to grow by approximately 7.5% between 2020 and 2030. Demand for development and travel patterns are also influenced by employment centers in the Seacoast, greater Boston, and other parts of southern New Hampshire.

While the population is growing, the region is also aging. The median age has increased has increased in 14 of the region's 18 municipalities, and about a quarter of residents were age 60 or older in 2024. Additional and more detailed demographic, housing, economic, and natural-resource data and trends are

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presented in the four planning components and in SRPC's 2026 Regional Data Snapshot.

Background and Purpose of this Plan

A comprehensive plan is a forward-looking, long-term, strategic vision and roadmap for the region's future. It considers many factors surrounding how we live, work, and move throughout the region and links together critical areas like land use, housing, transportation, and economic development topics. A comprehensive plan reflects the values, priorities, needs, and aspirations of the residents, businesses, and communities throughout the Strafford Region, and ensures their voices and perspectives act the foundation to the plan. The name Forward Thinking reflects the visionary and thoughtful nature of the process we will undertake to develop a plan that embodies local and regional perspectives, and the collaborative spirit of a vision for the region.

This plan updates the region's previous compressive plan, *Local Solutions for the Strafford* Region, which was adopted in 2015. As the region has continued to evolve over the last decade, an updated plan will ensure that changing demographics, economic conditions, housing needs, infrastructure demands, and environmental considerations are accounted for. An updated plan also ensures that the vision for the region aligns with local priorities and needs. Under RSA 36:47 (I), regional planning commissions in New Hampshire are required to prepare and regularly update a comprehensive plan for development in their region. *Forward Thinking* is advisory only, and aims to support municipal decision making, local planning efforts, and help coordinate on challenges and opportunities that extend beyond individual municipal boundaries.

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Shaping this Plan

The development the four components that culminate to represent ***Forward Thinking*** were informed by public outreach and engagement, review of local municipal planning documents, data analyses, and input from SRPC Commissioners and regional partners. Input was gathered during the development of the CEDS, MTP , Land Use and Environment chapter, and Climate chapter. Results from public input were considered along with the review of municipal master plans and regional data anlyses. The Regional Plan Subcommittee and the committees responsible for the CEDS (Strategy Committee) and MTP (Policy Committee) provided additional insights and refined the themes, goals, and objectives reflected in each respective component of ***Forward Thinking***.

Outreach and Engagement Efforts

SRPC used a variety of different outreach methods to understand what residents value about their communities, what changes they anticipate, and where regional efforts may support local planning and investments.

In April 2025, SRPC convened SRPC Commissioners, municipal representatives, and regional partners. Activities and discussions included identifying regional strengths, opportunities, and aspirations in the region where attendees talked about land use, economic development, and transportation topics.

An online survey was available from January through July 2025 and received 353 responses. Questions included topics such as housing affordability and development, transportation access and travel patterns, recreation and community amenities, economic conditions, and the places and amenities residents value where they live and work.

During August and September 2025, SRPC staff tabled at seven community events/locations across five municipalities in the region. Staff captured feedback on posters, response cards, and via conversations with community members. Topics included community character, housing, relationships with neighboring municipalities, and more.

From late 2025 into January 2026, SRPC staff conducted discussions with eight municipal planning boards. These conversations discussed local priorities and constraints related to housing and tax base, transportation and utility

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infrastructure, climate-related challenges, collaboration across municipal boundaries, and more.

As with all SRPC programs, projects, notices of funding opportunities, and organizational updates, *Forward Thinking* content was added to SRPC's Facebook and LinkedIn rotation. The 20 posts included survey updates, announcements that SRPC staff would be at community events, and other relevant information.

Local Master Plan Reviews

SRPC staff reviewed all master plans of the region's 18 municipalities and have provided high-level summaries of the local visions for Land Use/Environment, Housing, Transportation, and Economic Development. The oldest master plan in the region is that of Rollinsford, last updated in 2011, although individual chapters of some master plans in our region are even older. Almost half of SRPC communities conducted whole or partial master plan updates in 2025 or 2026. These communities were Brookfield, Dover, Lee, Madbury, Newmarket, Northwood, Nottingham, and Somersworth.

Key Findings

Housing Affordability and Development

Housing emerged as an important economic and community concern. More than three-quarters of survey respondents stated that housing cost and availability were a challenge for the region's economy. Throughout engagement, there was interest in housing options for different ages and incomes while concerns were raised about sprawl and the loss of natural space. Nearly three-quarters of survey respondents chose locating new development in already developed areas, while more than two-thirds supported focusing growth along existing transportation corridors.

Businesses, the Workforce, and Child Care

The region's local businesses, educational institutions, and downtowns were continuously highlighted as strengths for the region. Despite these strengths, nearly half of survey respondents highlighted that limited access to child care was an economic challenge. Furthermore, and about one-third of survey respondents identified a limited supply of workers to fill available jobs was an economic constraint.

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Transportation and Safety

In the regionwide survey, sidewalks and public transportation were the two highest ranked transportation priorities. In the survey and in feedback gathered at community events, individuals discussed that the reliance on personal vehicles, especially in rural communities, led to gaps in connections to employment, healthcare, and other destinations. Several individuals discussed that older adults, younger residents, and people unable to drive may face different barriers to mobility. Members of the public and municipal board members also raised concerns about speeds, bicycle and pedestrian safety, and the costs of maintaining transportation infrastructure.

Trails and Recreation

Trails and natural areas were identified as significant assets for recreation and transportation. Over 80 percent of survey respondents indicated that having walking paths or trails close to home was important. Over half of survey respondents valued bicycle paths or trails nearby to their homes. Maintaining recreation assets, improving trail connection, and promoting stewardship of the natural resources were also discussed as key considerations.

Infrastructure Capacity and Investments

Conversations with municipal boards highlighted the that limited water, wastewater, roadway, and other infrastructure can constrain traditional development patterns. Many survey respondents favored development in already built locations, but only about 30 percent identified investment in new infrastructure among their first or second priorities.

Regional Partnerships

Municipal boards, Commissioners, and regional partners highlighted that shared resources, intermunicipal cooperation, and more accessible information can help communities address issues that extend beyond local boundaries, such as transportation corridors, watersheds, housing, and the economy.

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Structure of the Components of this Plan

Forward Thinking: A Comprehensive Plan for the Strafford Region brings together several of the region's long-range planning efforts as one coordinated plan. It includes a Land Use and Environment Chapter, the 2026–2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) acing as a transportation chapter, the 2026–2030 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) acting as a economic development chapter, and a climate chapter. All of these planning documents were updated in concert with one another. Additionally, these four documents address different responsibilities, but many of the needs they identify are closely related.

The Land Use and Environment Chapter discusses the priorities of communities to accommodate housing and other development needs and pressures while protecting natural resources, maintaining community character, and planning for infrastructure needs. The MTP establishes the long term priorities for a efficient, accessible, and safe transportation network in the region. The CEDS provides a five-year vision and strategy for a strong and vibrant economy and economic opportunity supported by sufficient and affordable housing, business development opportunities, workforce and education pathways, and strong communities. The climate chapter addresses changing environmental conditions and updates climate projections, and highlights different ways to promote community preparedness for climate adaptation and mitigation efforts.

Each of these respective documents that make up *Forward Thinking* serve a specific planning function of SRPC's various designations and responsibilities. The CEDS is prepared by the Strafford Economic Development District, funded by the U.S. EDA, and includes a list of priority projects identified from the region that will support the region is meeting its economic development goals. The MTP is developed under SRPC's role as a Metropolitan Planning Organization, funded by the U.S. DOT, and addresses the region's long term transportation needs, projects, and financial constraints. The Land Use and Environment chapter, funded by the U.S. HUD, and Climate chapter, funded by the NHCF, offer guidance to municipalities and considerations for land use, natural resource, and climate adaptation and mitigation planning under the organization's role as a regional planning commission.

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Shared Planning Framework

SRPC developed these four respective plans, acting as the four components that make up *Forward Thinking*, through a consistent planning process, with each sharing a common framework and structure. Each leverages analyses of existing conditions in the region, relevant projections and trends, public engagement, and input from municipal and regional partners. All of this information and engagement supported the development of a vision for each respective component, a set of themes that organize major priorities, various goal statements, and objectives and strategic direction.

Themes are specific to each chapter, but often address common regional needs. Both the CEDS and Land Use and Environment Chapter identify housing as a key priority, with the CEDS highlighting its relationship to the workforce and economy and both considering where and how growth can occur to support strong and resilient communities. Transportation accessibility impacts economic opportunity and mobility, community health, and the ability of residents to age in place, establishing crossovers with the CEDS and Land Use and Environment chapter. Additionally, both infrastructure and natural resource planning are closely related to climate preparedness.

Shared Lenses

Four common overarching lenses are present throughout the CEDS, MTP, Land Use and Environment chapter, and Climate chapter. These lenses are established to help guide how the region considerations its goals for the region.

Regional Partnerships and Collaboration

Strengthen connections between municipal leaders, residents, businesses, and other partners and stakeholders to share information, build capacity, and development regional priorities.

Resiliency and Future Readiness

Plan for changes that include shifting demographics, technological advances, environmental changes and more to make investments that support future needs.

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Quality of Life and Community Identity

Preserve and enhance valuable historic, natural, cultural, and recreation assets that give the region its unique character while supporting investments that promote healthy and vibrant communities where people want to live, work, and visit.

Age Friendliness

Consider the needs of different ages and abilities to ensure that the region can cater to meet the needs of all people through all stages of life.

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Economic Development

The 2026–2030 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) establishes a five-year direction for economic development in the Strafford Region. Economic development includes business growth and employment, but it is also influenced by housing, education, infrastructure, transportation, community services, and quality of life. The region benefits from established businesses, major educational institutions, downtowns and village centers, and natural and cultural resources. However, housing costs, workforce availability, child care needs, and changing markets influence the ability of residents and businesses to succeed.

The CEDS identifies four themes to address these related priorities.

Housing

Goal Statement: Diverse and affordable housing options that support workforce needs and economic growth while leveraging the region's readiness for development and investments, and existing built assets.

Objectives and Strategic Direction

- Address housing supply constraints across all housing types.
- Address affordability challenges, including property tax burdens, to better attract and retain the workforce.
- Promote adaptive reuse and redevelopment opportunities.
- Ensure development balances needs for housing and protection of the environment and natural assets.
- Plan for development in coordination with water and sewer capacity and investments.

Business, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship

Goal Statement: A resilient and innovative regional economy which supports businesses, non-profits, and entrepreneurs; where these groups and industries can quickly adapt and be prepared for emerging social, environmental, and technological trends, and can engage in data-driven decision making.

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Objectives and Strategic Direction

- Monitor and assist businesses and economic development stakeholders respond to emerging trends and challenges, including tariffs, technological advancement, energy production and storage, and shifting market conditions.
- Support businesses and entrepreneurship through resource navigation, connecting businesses and entrepreneurs to relevant tools, technical assistance, and funding opportunities.
- Cultivate a strong business community through networking and public-private partnership opportunities.
- Maintain robust data metrics to guide decision making, track economic performance, and identify opportunities for growth.
- Promote the region's specialty industries and innovation, tourism, including aerospace and advanced manufacturing.
- Support business attraction and retention strategies that diversify the tax base, while improving understanding of how state business taxes influence local tax pressures.
- Analyze research on the diversification of energy types to power cost effective, sustainable business operations and economic activity.
- Promote the region's strong broadband infrastructure as a competitive advantage and strengthen digital literacy initiatives.

Workforce, Education, and Child Care

Goal Statement: A strong and supported workforce with access to affordable child care; alongside a sustainable and robust education and talent pipeline that addresses existing workforce challenges through proactive planning and partnerships to identify emerging trends, skills gaps, and the region's education systems.

Objectives and Strategic Direction

- Build understanding and identify opportunities to address workforce challenges, including attraction and retention.
- Identify current and emerging business needs with workforce training and education to address skills gaps.
- Promote, leverage, and enhance the region's high-quality education systems, including kindergarten through 12th grade, technical and

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vocational training, and higher education to strengthen long-term talent development.
- Support the expansion of child care affordability and availability to enhance workforce participation.

Healthy and Vibrant Communities

Goal Statement: A region that continues to prioritize leveraging, enhancing, and protecting its built infrastructure and local and regional assets that make it a desirable place where people want to live, visit, and do business now and in the future.

Objectives and Strategic Direction

- Preserve and market the region's unique natural, cultural, and recreational assets as a means to attract and retain families, workers, and businesses.
- Identify opportunities to boost community vibrancy and promote community pride and respect.
- Strengthen and promote strong community feel and sense of place to drive the local economy.
- Support healthy lifestyles and promote communities that are accessible via all forms of transportation.
- Promote healthcare access and affordability.
- Improve connections between recreation, natural assets, and town centers.
- Promote improved connectivity and transportation access for all, including walkers, bicyclists, transit riders, and drivers, within and between communities.
- Promote thoughtful land use planning for emerging uses, such as data centers, to protect community health, character, and quality of life.

View the full 2026-2030 CEDS here: https://straffordrpcnh.gov/docs/ceds-2026-2030/

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Transportation

Text here

MTP THEMES, GOALS, AND DIRECTION

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Land Use and Environment

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LUE THEMES, GOALS, AND DIRECTION

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Climate Adaptation and Mitigation

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CLIMATE THEMES, GOALS, AND DIRECTION

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Connecting Future Regional Priorities

Where the four planning documents intersect, several themes and topics where coordination and focus can support local decisions and regional efforts rise to the top shaping future regional priorities.

Accommodating Housing Needs and Thoughtfully Guiding Growth

The cost of housing represents one of the largest financial burdens facing individuals and families in the region. A lack of affordable housing and options for different housing types also impacts the regions businesses and their ability to attract and retain employees. The 2023 Regional Housing Needs Assessment estimate that 9,520 additional homes were needed in the region between 2020 and 2040. Communities throughout the region can consider various options for a broader range of housing types and development patterns including infill, redevelopment, and adaptive reuse in areas where infrastructure and services already exist and can support development. The availability of water and sewer connections, locations and types of natural resources, and local community character and preferences are key for each community in the region to consider when shaping approaches to meeting housing demand. Regional priorities include:

- Expand opportunities for smaller homes, multifamily housing, and other housing options that meet the needs of those across various life stages and incomes.
- Encourage infill development, adaptive reuse, and redevelopment of existing areas infrastructure is already present or planned and can support growth.
- Address regulatory barriers and coordinate housing decisions across municipal boundaries to account for transportation capacity, water resources, and conservation priorities.

Strengthening the Regional Economy and Workforce

Housing, business development, education and training, child care, and community vitality are critical economic development priorities. A resilient regional economy depends on the success of businesses, nonprofits, entrepreneurs, and the workforce. Priorities including supporting location

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business and entrepreneurs, improving access to financing and technical assistance, and supporting the education and workforce pipeline can help create a more resilient regional economy well adapted to responding to changing economic conditions. Affordable and accessible housing and child care options can help provide residents will greater opportunity to participate in the workforce and strengthen economic opportunity. Moreover, supporting local investments into community centers, downtowns, villages, and community assets will help sustain and create places where people want to live and conduct business. Regional priorities include:

- Strengthen connections between businesses and entrepreneurs with financing, technical assistance, partnerships, and other resources.
- Foster robust education and training pathways that meet current employer needs and anticipate future needs for both technical and skilled roles.
- Support affordable child care development to expand opportunities for workforce participation.
- Prioritize local investments that improve quality of life and community health, including supporting downtowns and village centers, access to recreation and transportation, and walkability.

Improving Access, Safety, and Transportation Options

The region will benefit from better connections among homes, jobs, education, healthcare, community centers, and recreation areas. Preserving existing roads and bridges, supporting transit and community transportation, completing trail and pedestrian connections, and reducing serious crashes are priorities that can improve mobility and accessibility for people of different ages and abilities. Transportation options vary across the region, and among different groups, such as older adults, people with disabilities, and households without access to a reliable vehicle. Regional priorities include:

- Improve connections throughout the region among a variety of modalities, including transit, passenger rail, walking, cycling, and personal vehicles.
- Extend and interconnect accessible train and pedestrian networks between and within communities.
- Reduce injuries and improve safety in the transportation network.
- Prioritize cost-effective upkeep and investments of roads, bridges, and other transportation infrastructure.

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Protecting Natural Resources and Promoting Stewardship and Responsible Recreation

The region's drinking water, wildlife habitats, local economies, and community identifies are all supported or sustained by the area's natural resources. Conservation and development are connected planning priorities and must be considered together, especially in places where development can impact natural resources or water quality. Moreover, promoting environmental stewardship and responsible recreating within the region's many natural resources through improved access to existing trails, parks, and natural areas can strengthen community quality of life and ecosystem health. Regional priorities include:

- Protect valuable habitats, wildlife corridors, drinking water resources, wetlands, and agricultural lands throughout the region.
- Strengthen considerations for conservation focused site designs for future development and infrastructure decisions.
- Maintain existing parks, trails, and other recreation assets while also promoting environmental and resource stewardship among all residents.

Preparing Infrastructure, Communities, and People for a Changing Climate

The climate is changing and flooding, extreme temperatures, drought, precipitation, and coastal and groundwater rise are all expected to increase in severity and unpredictability over the coming century. Emphasizing local preparedness, infrastructure resilience, readiness, energy efficiency, thoughtful development patters informed by climate science, and community health will be critical to adapt to the changing climate and mitigate its impacts in communities throughout the region. Regional priorities include:

- Leverage vulnerability assessments, hazard mitigation plans, and updated climate projects to inform local investments, ordinances, and priorities.
- Maintain and invest in water, sewer, stormwater, transportation, and other key systems and networks to improve resilience.
- Improve and promote energy efficiency

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- Extend education and resources to residents and businesses to promote readiness and preparedness for potential climate impacts and adaptation and mitigation methods.

Strengthening Public Participation, Civic Engagement, and Regional Partnerships

A shared emphasis on regional collaboration, future readiness, quality of life and age friendliness are consistent throughout the components of ***Forward Thinking***, and rely on municipal leadership and coordination between state agencies, nonprofits, businesses, and residents. Clear and consistent public information, meaningful engagement, and strong relationships and open dialogue between residents and local and state level leaders can strengthen community capacity to meet the region's needs today, and approach future challenges with preparedness and poise. Regional priorities include:

- Provide regular and accessible information about regional conditions, initiatives, tradeoffs, and show how public input informs decisions.
- Create opportunities for inclusive participation across ages, abilities, anc communities.
- Support intermunicipal projects and shared municipal resources to improve regional capacity and more efficient use of public funds. Resources.

Moving to Action

Each of the four pieces of ***Forward Thinking*** include detailed objectives, strategies, priorities, and preliminary actions. Advancing these priorities identified for the region will depend on municipal decisions, funding, and partnerships, but will be supported by the Strafford Regional Planning Commission through its work in planning, data analysis, mapping, technical assistance, and regional coordination.

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Appendix

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