

# **Planning for the Future of Massachusetts:**

## **Six Key Recommendations to our Next Governor to Achieve Sustainable Growth in the Commonwealth**



American Planning Association – Massachusetts Chapter  
Massachusetts Association of Consulting Planners  
Massachusetts Association of Planning Directors  
and  
Massachusetts Association of Regional Planning Agencies

*With contributions from the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance*

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## "New Study Links High Home Prices to Job Losses in Bay State"

*News Release by Massachusetts Association of REALTORS, May 22, 2006.*

"Massachusetts needs more affordable housing to keep graduates of its high-powered colleges and universities from flying the coop to more affordable nesting spots... there's no time to waste."

*Editorial, the Springfield Republican, May 28, 2006.*

"The type of development we are seeing is bad for wildlife habitat and bad for people who want affordable housing."

*Laura Johnson, president of Mass Audubon, November 10, 2003.*

We see these stories almost weekly across the state. Yet despite doom and gloom headlines and news stories, the Commonwealth has been making progress on these issues. By building upon recent efforts toward more integrated statewide planning for growth, the next Administration can ensure that we see fewer editorials about young talent leaving the state, and fewer reports on inefficient land consumption. Instead, we'll see more stories about sound public investment supported by all levels of government to promote resource protection, affordable housing, transportation choices, and economic development.

Tackling these issues requires state leadership in planning. Four organizations at the forefront of statewide planning came together to highlight important steps that should be undertaken to plan for the Commonwealth's future. This white paper provides an overview of how the new Administration can lead the way toward promoting the type of growth that fits the needs of our residents and businesses.

The paper begins with a review of recent state investments and successful planning initiatives under recent administrations, which have generated valuable resources and shaped the planning framework that exists today. This is followed by six key recommendations for moving forward.

# Recent Planning Achievements in Massachusetts

Over the last 30 years, Massachusetts has engaged in planning by promoting downtown revitalization, affordable housing, economic development, smart growth, and other initiatives. The most far reaching and well-funded planning program in recent years, Executive Order 418, was initiated in 2000 to promote better land use planning and to create housing and employment opportunities. Subsequent Administrations have continued to build on the legacy of this landmark program, targeting limited funding resources. Highlights of progress include:

- **Collaboration between State agencies.** The Department of Housing and Community Development, Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, Department of Economic Development, and the Executive Office of Transportation formed an Interagency Working Group under EO 418. Coordination continues under the Office for Commonwealth Development (OCD).
- **Investment of funding for community planning and implementation.** EO 418 provided \$12 million for communities to plan for housing, economic development, natural resource protection, and transportation. In total, 226 out of 351 communities participated in EO 418.
- **Leveraging of local financial and planning resources.** Many communities contributed local funds to expand the scope of their Community Development Plans. In fact, communities contributed \$1.8 million statewide. Many more have invested local resources to implement plans created under EO 418.
- **Framework established for local planning and effective use of resources.** Three aspects of EO 418 helped make local planning more efficient and economical: creation of a pre-qualified list of planning consultants, coordination through Regional Planning Agencies (RPAs), and a clear planning framework established by the state.
- **Substantial groundwork toward building statewide and regional land use plans.** We now have an accessible and widely used databank of plans and maps created through EO 418. These

*The town of Norwood used EO 418 funds to develop a housing plan that has facilitated a town-wide housing rehabilitation program, and the approval of 280 units, 16% of which were affordable. These included transit-oriented development, a mill conversion, a 40R development, a brownfield redevelopment, and a multifamily housing renovation.*

plans can serve as a baseline for mapping and assessing the impacts of anticipated growth for all communities and can facilitate regional planning and improve coordination between communities.



- **Movement toward good planning policies.** More recently, Chapters 40R and 40S provide financial incentives for “Smart Growth Zoning.” State planning guidance has evolved, with emphasis on the “Sustainable Development Principles,” a Smart Growth Planning Toolkit, and rewarding local implementation of state objectives through the Commonwealth Capital Fund.

# Moving Forward

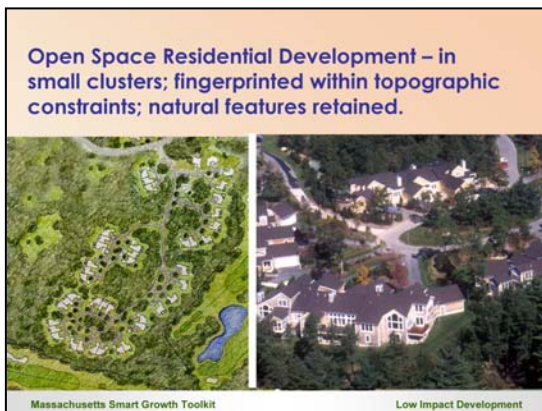
## 1) Build on recent achievements and investments in state planning

Given the substantial investments that have been made in developing state-wide planning resources; defining a vision for sustainable growth; and effective collaboration between the state, local and regional levels, there is a strong base upon which the new administration can build. Establishing planning policy that evolves from the existing framework and resources will yield more effective results than starting over.



## 2) Modernize the state zoning code

One of the main engines behind poor planning and sprawl is our outdated state zoning laws and local zoning codes that try to minimize the number of homes built. The result is loss of open space even as housing production fails to keep pace with demand. Solving this problem requires a thoughtful balance between our need for more housing and our tradition of home rule. We need strong executive leadership, which includes stakeholders in crafting solutions, to guide development toward appropriate places, encourage housing construction, and protect significant natural areas. Some possible elements of a holistic package include:



- Requiring that community master plans conform to smart growth principles, and that development follows these master plans.
- Reforming the antiquated provisions of Chapter 40A to encourage smart zoning practices.
- Allowing natural resource or agricultural-preservation zoning that is balanced by greater density in town or city centers.
- Setting regional performance goals for housing production and providing incentives to municipalities to meet these goals.

## 3) Develop a statewide plan for smart development and smart preservation

We need to plan for growth in our urban, suburban, and rural areas. Our state needs to focus on making our cities and towns livable for all, balancing infrastructure improvements between rural and urban communities, and ensuring all communities are economically and environmentally sustainable.

To make these decisions about how we, as a Commonwealth, direct growth and development, residents need to be meaningfully involved.





**Recommendations:**

- ✓ Create a set of statewide land use goals for conservation areas that recognize different regional conditions through an open and participatory process. This can be built upon the Statewide Land Conservation Plan, which was developed by a collaboration of public and private interests.
- ✓ Prepare a complementary plan identifying priority development areas with input from municipalities and regional planning agencies. The EO 418 plans and regional plans developed by RPAs can be used to begin the process. A statewide plan would be a valuable resource to communities and planners around the state struggling to make land use decisions. Housing plans which have already been prepared by over 100 communities can be a starting point for the housing component.
- ✓ Build on existing transportation plans to formulate a state transportation plan that relates to and reinforces local and regional land use goals. Priority development areas should be first in line to get public transportation dollars, and communities in those new corridors should be required to implement land use changes that facilitate compact and efficient development.

**4) Elevate the coordination of land use and capital planning across state government**

Massachusetts needs state-level leadership in land use and capital planning. Four state agencies have been formally working together through the Office for Commonwealth Development (OCD) to coordinate programs and spending and improve communication. The next Administration can continue this momentum toward integrated, forward-thinking decisions on growth.



**Recommendations:**

- ✓ Establish an effective mechanism for carrying out coordinated statewide planning inside state government such as an Office of State Planning. State leadership in coordinating investments and policies between different agencies ensures more efficient spending and progress toward state development goals.
- ✓ Improve the coordination of state economic development functions under this umbrella. Business expansion and location decisions are intertwined with our housing, transportation, and conservation decisions.
- ✓ Incorporate other state entities that make important decisions on large capital projects, such as the School Building Authority. Investment decisions by these entities should be guided by the Commonwealth’s sustainable development principles.
- ✓ Continue an incentive-based approach to entice communities to make decisions consistent with state growth policies. Incentive-based programs, such as the Commonwealth Capital Fund, have demonstrated an influence on local efforts.

**5) Address issues that surpass local boundaries**

Many of our most critical planning issues – from creating attractive and vibrant communities to spurring economic innovation and competitiveness – reach beyond municipal boundaries. They require a regional focus if they are to be efficiently and comprehensively addressed.

Perhaps nowhere has this point been made more convincing of late than in northeastern Massachusetts, the site of the devastating “Mothers’ Day Flood” of 2006. With record rainfall causing the highest river flows in 70 years, public officials and citizens alike are questioning the ability of purely local land use plans and regulations to adequately protect public health and safety, property, and environmental quality.



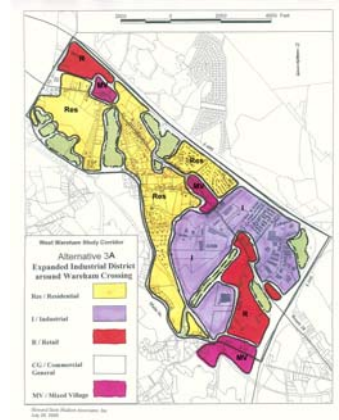
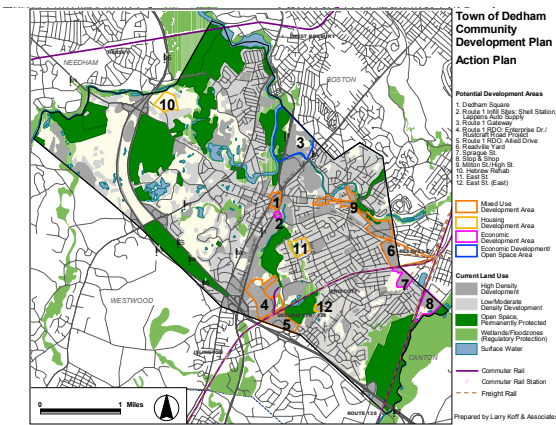
Land use policy, planning, and regulation should occur at the right scale to address the problems and the opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Municipal government is too small to affect the systems and markets that operate across town and city borders: transportation systems, markets for housing, labor, goods and services, drinking water supply, and wildlife habitat. At the other end of the scale, state government can be too cumbersome to be effective on the regional or local level. Yet, regional institutions have little authority. We need to balance state policy leadership, regional action, and local understanding of problems and impacts.

**Recommendations:**

- ✓ Increase funding for regional planning. Often RPAs must compete for grant funds, which means that RPAs do not always have the resources to help communities work regionally on day-to-day projects. Better funding can strengthen the capacity of RPAs

to work with communities to more efficiently address housing needs, economic development opportunities, water issues, and other challenges.

- ✓ Reward communities for regional cooperation. Communities have little incentive to work with their neighbors when planning for growth and development. Giving a leg-up on grants to those communities that work regionally, such as through the Commonwealth Capital scorecard, would be a good start.
- ✓ Identify opportunities to reduce reliance on local tax revenue so communities can work with – rather than compete with – their neighbors when planning for growth.



## 6) Strengthen local capacity

Enhancing local capacity to plan and manage the broad range of issues affecting our cities and towns is an essential ingredient in building stronger communities. We highlight three strategies of proven effectiveness.

### *Recommendations:*

- ✓ Fund planning. Two-thirds of communities participated in EO 418. Additional funding for planning will help many of these communities act on the strategies they have identified in their plans and will provide the opportunity for communities that are still lagging behind. State funding has been shown to leverage substantial local funds and planning resources.
- ✓ Re-institute a Master Vendor List and Services Agreements to allow communities to retain consulting services efficiently. This simple yet effective tool allowed large and small communities to overcome the barrier of time-consuming paper work to participate in state planning programs. Communities were able to simply select consultants from a list of over 100 highly qualified firms that were familiar with the state’s planning objectives.
- ✓ Provide a stable, long-term funding source to ensure that the state makes good on its commitment to fund 40R and 40S.