

Southern Maine Regional Planning Commission

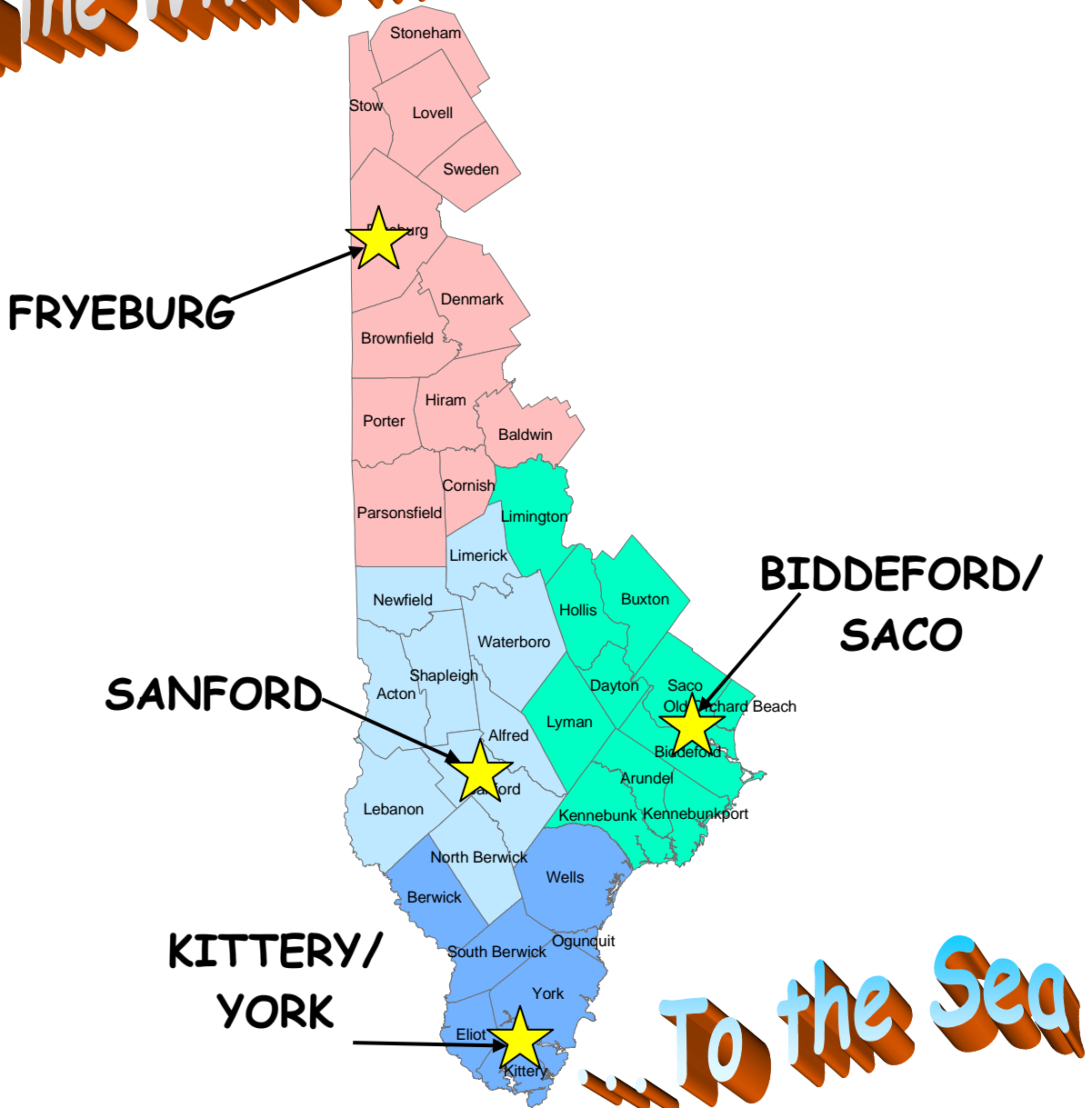
CONNECTING COMMUNITIES:

Planning in Southern Maine

A Report on Regional Visioning

August 2004

From the White Mountains



To the Sea

Introduction and Background

Since 1990, the 39-town SMRPC region has experienced tremendous growth and change. From 1990 to 2000 the region added over 15,000 housing units and more than 23,000 new residents. While growth was fastest in outlying areas of the region that are becoming bedroom communities, there was also growth in service center towns and rural towns. In fact, all 39 towns in the region added population from 1990 and 2000 and it appears that all are continuing to grow.

Growth in the Southern Maine region has been driven largely by wealth from outside the region, with many new residents either commuting to jobs in Portland, Portsmouth or even Massachusetts, or coming from out of state to retirement or vacation homes. A simple illustration of how the Southern Maine region is changing comes from looking at the Census Bureau's definition of the Portland Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). In 1990, just five towns in the SMRPC region were counted as part of the Portland MSA. In 2002, the Portland MSA was redefined to include 17 towns in the region. The SMRPC portion of the Portland MSA now includes every town from Kennebunk to Parsonsfield.

Looking at the character of the residential growth that has occurred, it has been almost entirely single-family development on isolated lots or in small subdivisions. As the region grows in piecemeal fashion, it is very difficult for local and regional planners to exact much control over the nature and the pace of growth. The end result is that transportation routes, public schools and municipal budgets are being strained, but little has been done in response.

As residential development has continued in Southern Maine, commercial development has followed as well, leading to increasing suburbanization of small towns and rural areas. There has been substantial strip and big box development in recent years in corridors such as Route 111 in Biddeford, Route 109 in South Sanford, Route 202 in Waterboro, and several sections of Route 1 from Kittery to Saco. The recent announcement of plans to build a 500,000 square foot retail power center on Route 111 in Biddeford further illustrates how the region continues to change.

There have been two major outcomes of the continued development pressure in Southern Maine. First, spiking land values have driven up housing prices and tax bills, leading to growing concerns about affordable housing and tax base. Second, most of the growth has been on large lots in rural areas, leading to the rapid consumption of land and to ever more contentious battles over new developments.

Even as development has occurred in the region, there have been mounting concerns about economic growth, particularly in its inland areas. Southern Maine has been hit hard by declines in the manufacturing and forestry sectors, and the region's economy has rapidly been transforming into more service-based industries that tend to pay lower wages. The region also faces the specter of the possible closing of the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery, which is the largest employer in the region and draws commuters from all over the area.

The sub-area with the greatest economic need is Sanford, which has had a far higher unemployment rate than the rest of Southern Maine for many years. In response to its continuing economic struggles, Sanford was the only town in Southern Maine that voted “yes” to a non-binding referendum in 2002 on whether or not it would consider being the host community for Maine’s first resort casino. This vote triggered one of the most contentious periods in Southern Maine’s recent history. However bitter, the debate did bring to the surface many regional planning issues that had been ignored for far too long, such as:

1. The region already faces mounting traffic congestion, housing shortages, and the pressures of sprawl and the casino would have made these situations worse
2. Neighboring towns had no voice in the decision-making process despite the fact that the casino would have had substantial impacts on these towns; and
3. Even though the region does need jobs and economic growth, there may be more responsible and sustainable means of accomplishing these goals.

The first two points are largely indisputable statements of fact about the realities of planning in Southern Maine. The first point addresses the region’s present condition and underscores the point that the fundamental nature of the region is changing. The second point highlights how Maine’s home rule laws that grant land use authority to individual municipalities—no matter how large the project—gives nearby communities that will be affected very little power to affect new developments. As for the final point, even most casino opponents agreed that some type of economic development was needed in the Sanford area, but few put forth alternative suggestions to the casino. In other words, they may not have known what they wanted, but they were quite sure about what they did NOT want.

Though the casino project has gone away, the underlying reasons for its backers to have supported it—job losses and high taxes—have not gone away. The things that casino opponents felt were already bad—traffic, not enough housing, sprawl—are still problems as well. As the Southern Maine region sought to move forward, no regional vision or coordinated strategy existed to address these and other problems.

A Regional Vision

With so much change having occurred in the region and continued pressure for more development, the Southern Maine Regional Planning Commission (SMRPC) embarked on a regional visioning exercise in early 2004. The exercise was aimed at laying the groundwork for positive change on a regional level well into the future. This visioning exercise represents the first such endeavor in the region since the *York County 2000* vision plan that was begun in 1988 and led to the subsequent creation of a regional plan in 1990.

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Some of the questions that SMRPC hoped to answer during this process included:

- What types of economic development do we want to attract?
- How much capacity do we really have to accommodate new growth?
- How can many towns work together to address the impacts of large-scale projects?
- What is the proper balance between preserving our character and ensuring our economic survival?
- Why doesn't the state take a more active role in issues that affect many towns?

The visioning exercise was conducted over the period of February to May of 2004 and was given the name *Connecting Communities: Planning in Southern Maine*. In all, SMRPC staff convened eight different visioning meetings covering many different topics at locations all over the region. These sessions engaged many different constituencies in our region and provided an education on a variety of planning topics including Growth Management, Public Services and Transportation. In all, about 150 government, community and business leaders participated in these meetings and provided us with tremendous insight into the prospects for regional collaboration as we attempt to solve our planning problems.

The first product of *Connecting Communities* is this report, which lays out the region's Vision Statement for the future. SMRPC's hope is that this document will lead to many coordinated regional and sub-regional planning efforts including, potentially, a new regional plan. The Vision Statements, goals and objectives that resulted from this exercise are shown on the following pages.

A Regional Vision Statement for Southern Maine, 2004

Land Use

Vision Statement: “The Southern Maine region promotes effective and proactive growth management policies that are spatially consistent among all municipalities.”

Policies and Strategies

- Develop a composite regional future land use map depicting growth and conservation areas in each municipality’s comprehensive plan.
- Analyze regional land use map for consistencies and incongruities at municipal borders, along corridors, and relationships to critical natural resources.
- Ensure greater consistency in municipal land use policies by creating and helping towns implement model ordinances and procedures for different land use issues, including:
 - Subdivision review
 - Special overlay districts
 - Cluster development
 - Interlocal agreements
 - Planning and Appeals board procedures
 - Alternative growth management techniques (other than zoning)
- Design and conduct educational programs for both adults and children aimed at informing the public at large about growth and planning issues.

Housing

Vision Statement: “The Southern Maine region offers adequate housing opportunities to people of all ages, income levels and needs and each municipality accepts its fair share of the region’s housing.”

Policies and Strategies

- Define fair share for each municipality and determine the “gap” that each needs to fill to meet the fair share.
- Identify and strengthen links between housing and other planning issues (transportation, economic development, natural resource protection, etc.)
- Engage private sector in housing efforts, particularly small businesses.
- Build capacity of local and regional groups to develop affordable housing units
- Develop model standards and ordinance language for housing issues, including:
 - Standards for tourist worker housing
 - Differential growth cap ordinance
 - Calculating municipal capacity for future growth
 - Fiscal impact model to measure costs of growth

Economic Development

Vision Statement: “Economic growth in the Southern Maine region is achieved at the appropriate scale and character for the particular area in which it occurs.”

Policies and Strategies

- Tailor economic development initiatives to the capacity of individual municipalities and groups of municipalities to accommodate growth.
- Invest in all types of infrastructure on a regional level.
- Increase capacity of smaller communities to attract economic development that respects their capacities for growth and their existing local character
- Eliminate regulatory barriers that may limit redevelopment of older buildings.
- Focus on growing small businesses by providing affordable incubator space in appropriate locations.
- Make use of the unique natural and historic resources of communities to attract appropriate economic growth.
- Update Defense Conversion Study in order to ensure that the region is properly prepared to respond to a possible base closure.

Transportation

Vision Statement: “Southern Maine’s transportation systems are efficient, safe and well balanced, and planning for future needs is done in a proactive and collaborative manner.”

Policies and Strategies

- Use DOT traffic movement permit process to address transportation issues in larger corridors, not just in immediate vicinity.
- Expand role of RTAC in corridor planning efforts.
- Use corridor studies as points of entry for regional transportation, economic development and land use planning.
- Measure cumulative impacts of smaller developments on regional transportation systems and establish impact fee system to address these impacts.
- Strengthen SMRPC’s role in coordinating municipal road funding application processes on a regional basis.
- Encourage public-private collaboration to fund road and transit improvements that are necessitated by new development.
- Expand transit options in rural areas of the region.
- Create uniform standards for access management that are administered by municipalities (similar to Shoreland Zoning).

Natural Resources/Environment

Vision Statement: “Critical natural and environmental resources are prioritized and protected through regional cooperation using a balance of regulatory and non-regulatory means.”

Policies and Strategies

- Define areas of regional critical concern and develop interlocal agreements to protect them.
- Compare composite regional future land use map (see Land Use goals) with regional environmental resources, including Beginning With Habitat and aquifers.
- Coordinate activities of regional land trusts with local planning efforts to ensure mutual benefits.
- Explore feasibility of regional Transfer of Development Rights programs in the Mt. Agamenticus area..
- Ensure greater consistency in municipal resource protection policies by creating and helping towns implement model ordinances and procedures for different environmental issues, including:
 - Protecting habitat identified in BWH program
 - Interlocal agreements to protect environmental resources
 - Protecting vernal pools
 - Protecting forested wetlands
 - Establishing Affordable Housing Land Trusts

Regional Collaboration

Vision Statements:

- “Municipalities in Southern Maine form interlocal and collaborative arrangements for functional purposes that are both cost effective and respectful of local identity and authority.”
- “Elected officials and appointed board members are up to date with state planning statutes and practice good boardsmanship, thus providing a stable environment for making local and regional land use decisions.”

Policies and Strategies

- Develop and support regional and sub-regional initiatives based on individual functions, including:
 - Economic development
 - Environmental protection
 - Housing
 - Transportation
 - Public infrastructure
- Conduct analyses of cost factors for different functions that address appropriate sizes of regions for optimal cost savings.
- Focus regional capital planning efforts on long-term needs, as most municipalities already have sufficiently dealt with short-term needs.
- Determine items for which cost may not be the predominant issue (e.g., community schools, recreational programs, basic town services, etc.)
- Support ongoing efforts being conducted at sub-regional levels