



WORKING DRAFT



Lower Connecticut River Valley  
Council of Governments

*Comprehensive Economic  
Development Strategy*

DRAFT 01.19.23

# Acknowledgments

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Town of Chester  
Town of Clinton  
Town of Cromwell  
Town of Deep River  
Town of Durham  
Town of East Haddam  
Town of East Hampton  
Town of Essex  
Town of Haddam  
Town of Killingworth  
Town of Lyme  
Town of Middlefield  
City of Middletown  
Town of Old Lyme  
Town of Old Saybrook  
Town of Portland  
Town of Westbrook

## Planning Consultants

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Interface Studio

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# 1

# INTRODUCTION

Old brownstone quarry, Portland







Salmon River, East Haddam

# What is a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)?

A CEDS is a process created by the US Economic Development Administration (EDA) for creating a strategy to support regional economic growth. An approved CEDS is an important step to becoming an approved Economic Development District. An approved CEDS makes identified projects in the Lower Connecticut River Valley region eligible for EDA funds and supports competitive grant applications.

## Why now?

The American Rescue Plan, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act provide federal resources to support regional economic development and infrastructure investment initiatives. Many of the funding opportunities are competitive applications and typically require identifying whether the programs are consistent with a regional comprehensive economic development program.

As the only region in Connecticut without a CEDS, the Lower Connecticut River Valley communities are at a disadvantage when competing for these funds. Having a CEDS does not guarantee receiving federal support, however, without one, it can be more difficult to compete for the funds. COVID-19 also brought significant changes in the region in terms of workforce trends and the need for reliable infrastructure, among others, which a more recent CEDS can help address.

## Planning context

This effort comes at the heels of previous planning efforts. In the fall of 2014 RiverCOG initiated the **GrowSmart** planning process to create an economic vision and direction for the Lower Connecticut River Valley region. The **2021 Regional Plan of Conservation and Development (RPOCD)**, was developed to address the issues of individual towns more holistically through a regional framework. Economic development, along with housing and a regional multimodal transportation system, will be key in making the RPOCD vision a reality. The **2022 Lower Connecticut River Valley Region Housing Plan** addressed the housing needs of the Lower Connecticut River Valley based on the findings of the RPOCD.

# Lower Connecticut River Valley region

The Lower Connecticut River Valley region includes 17 cities and towns: Chester, Clinton, Cromwell, Deep River, Durham, East Haddam, East Hampton, Essex, Haddam, Killingworth, Lyme, Middlefield, Middletown, Old Lyme, Old Saybrook, Portland, and Westbrook. The Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments (RiverCOG) board also serves as the region’s Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) policy board along with the regional transit district, chamber of commerce and a non-voting member from the Connecticut Department of Transportation.

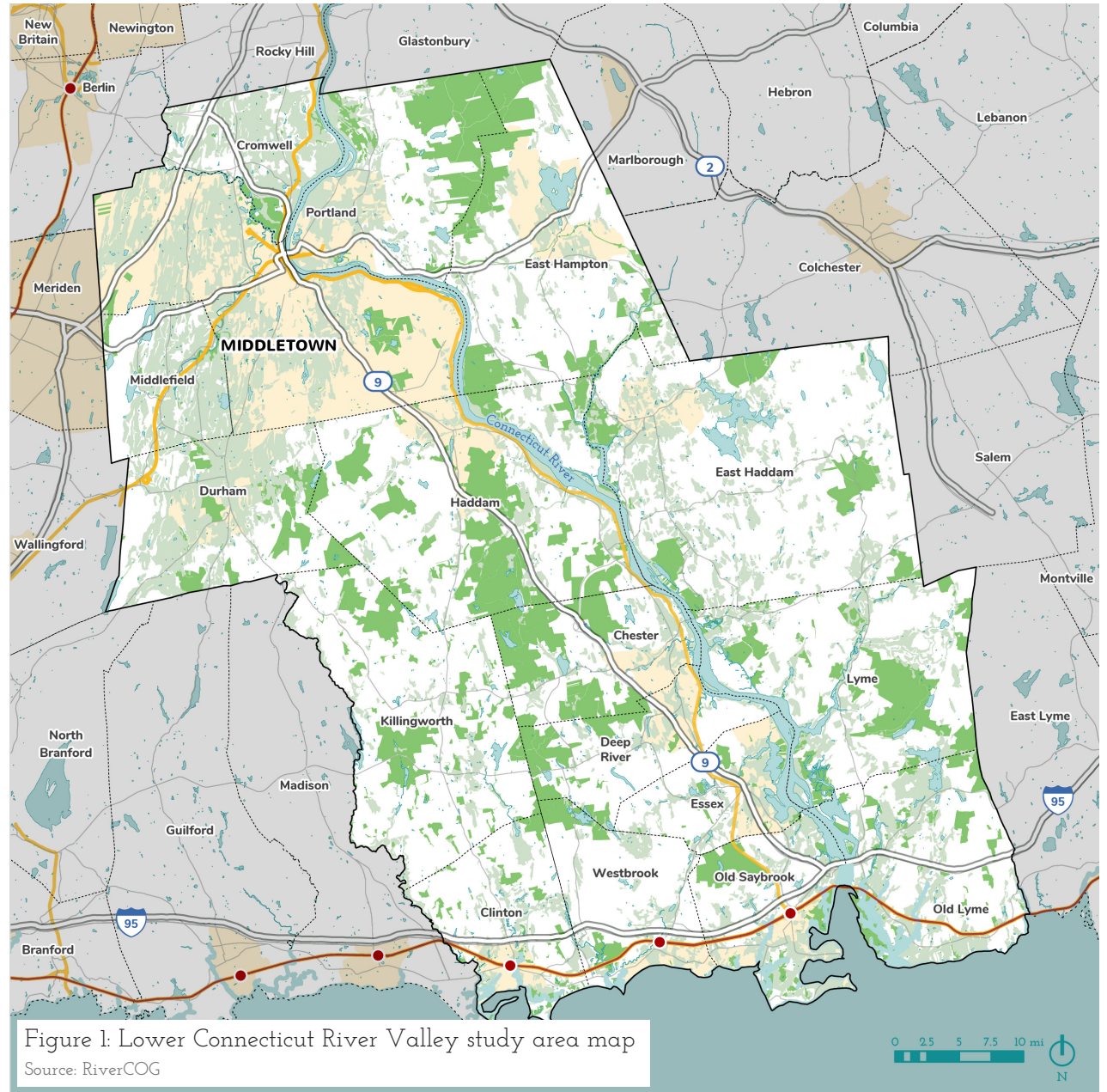
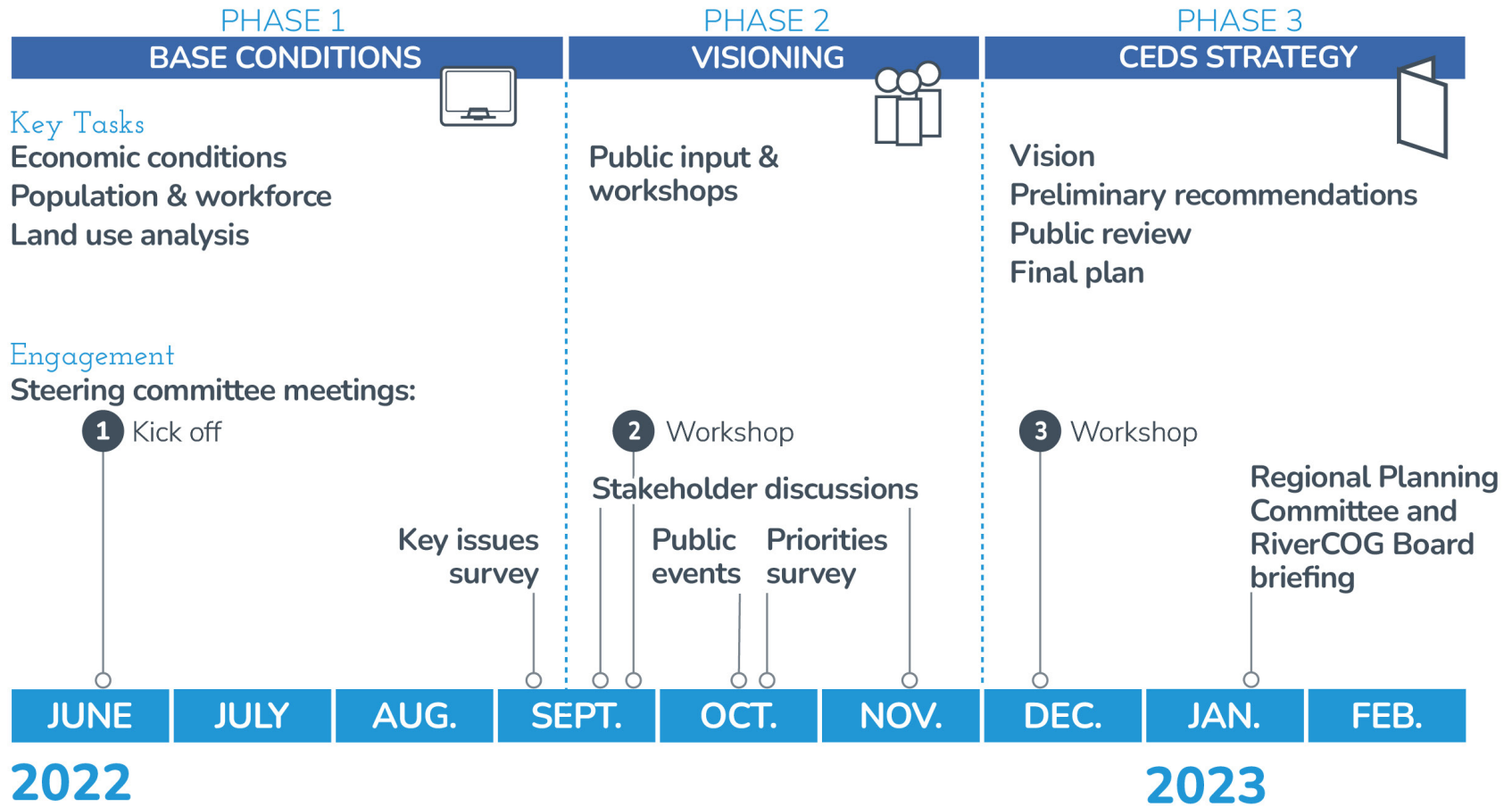


Figure 1: Lower Connecticut River Valley study area map  
Source: RiverCOG

- Study Area
- Town Boundaries
- Passenger Rail
- Freight Rail
- Water body
- Open Space
- Farmland Soils

# The Process

The CEDS is 9-month process and involved three phases: Base Conditions, Visioning and CEDS Strategy.



CEDS process



## Public Engagement

### June 2022

Steering Committee Kickoff (meeting 1) held on June 20

### September 2022

Stakeholder Sessions (September 19-23)

- Planning and economic development representatives from 13 communities
- 5 business groups
- Online survey of key issues – 91 respondents

Steering Committee workshop (meeting 2) held on September 28

### October 2022

Two public workshops on October 12 & 13 in Middletown and Old Saybrook, and three pop up sessions – 63 participants in total

Survey on Plan Priorities sent to regional Chamber

### November 2022

Large employer Diversity & Training discussion group

### December 2022

Steering Committee workshop (meeting 3) held on December 7 to review findings and proposed initial recommendations

### January 2023

Regional Planning Committee and RiverCOG Board briefing in January

**57** Comments received  
**208** Participants



# 2 EXISTING CONDITIONS





# The Lower Connecticut River Valley economy today

## Quick facts about the economy

- The local economy has fully recovered from the pandemic in terms of GDP, jobs, and incomes.
- Employment has grown but key employment sectors have not changed since 2014.
- Self employment keeps gaining in importance
- The Lower Connecticut River Valley imports the majority of its workers from other parts of Connecticut.
- The workforce is getting older and more diverse as is the local population.

## Employment

The Lower Connecticut River Valley hosts approximately 100,000 jobs including private payroll jobs, self-employed individuals and government employees. The region has recovered from COVID but is still below the 2016 employment peak of approximately 101,000 jobs. In 2021 private payroll jobs represented 62% of total employment, self employment approximately 27% of total employment. Government employment represented about 10% of the total.

The Lower Connecticut River Valley has shown steady business growth, although it is slower than in the past. Self employment has added almost 2000 people since 2014. Establishments with payrolls (a proxy for businesses) have added almost 800.

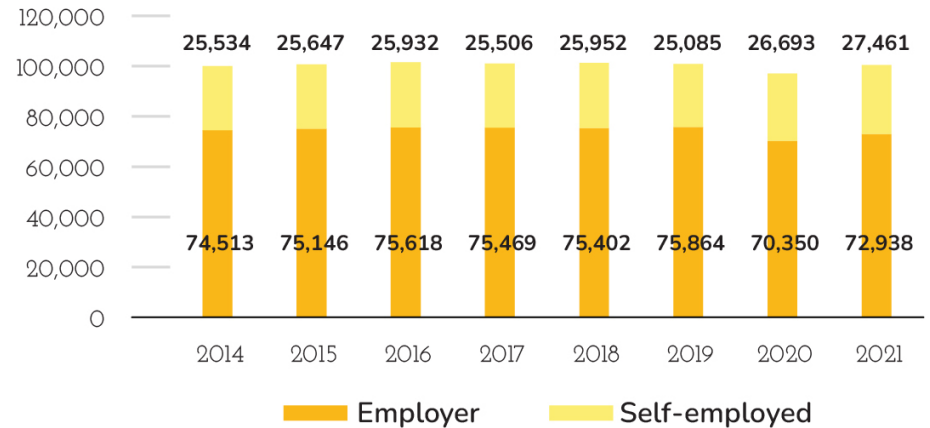


Figure 2: Total employment

Source: NP calculations from BEA.gov Table CAEMP25N revised 11/14/2022

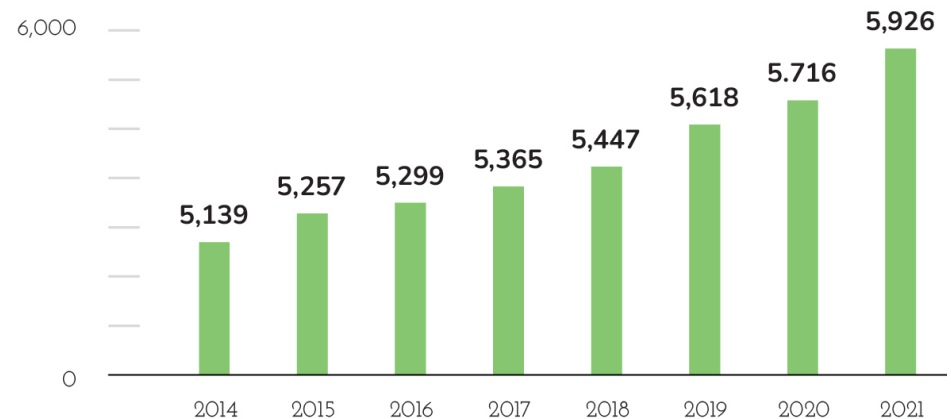


Figure 3: Payroll establishments since 2014

Source: NP calculations from BLS and CT LMI QCEW data

## Private employment sectors

Key private employment sectors have not changed since the 2016 GrowSmart report. However, the top four sectors are down more than 2300 jobs since 2019 with healthcare and social assistance representing nearly half of the job loss.

Self-employment is an important contributor to several sectors. For example, an additional 3300 people work in professional technical services as well as an additional 3000 people in construction. Nearly 5000 additional people have ties to the real estate sector.

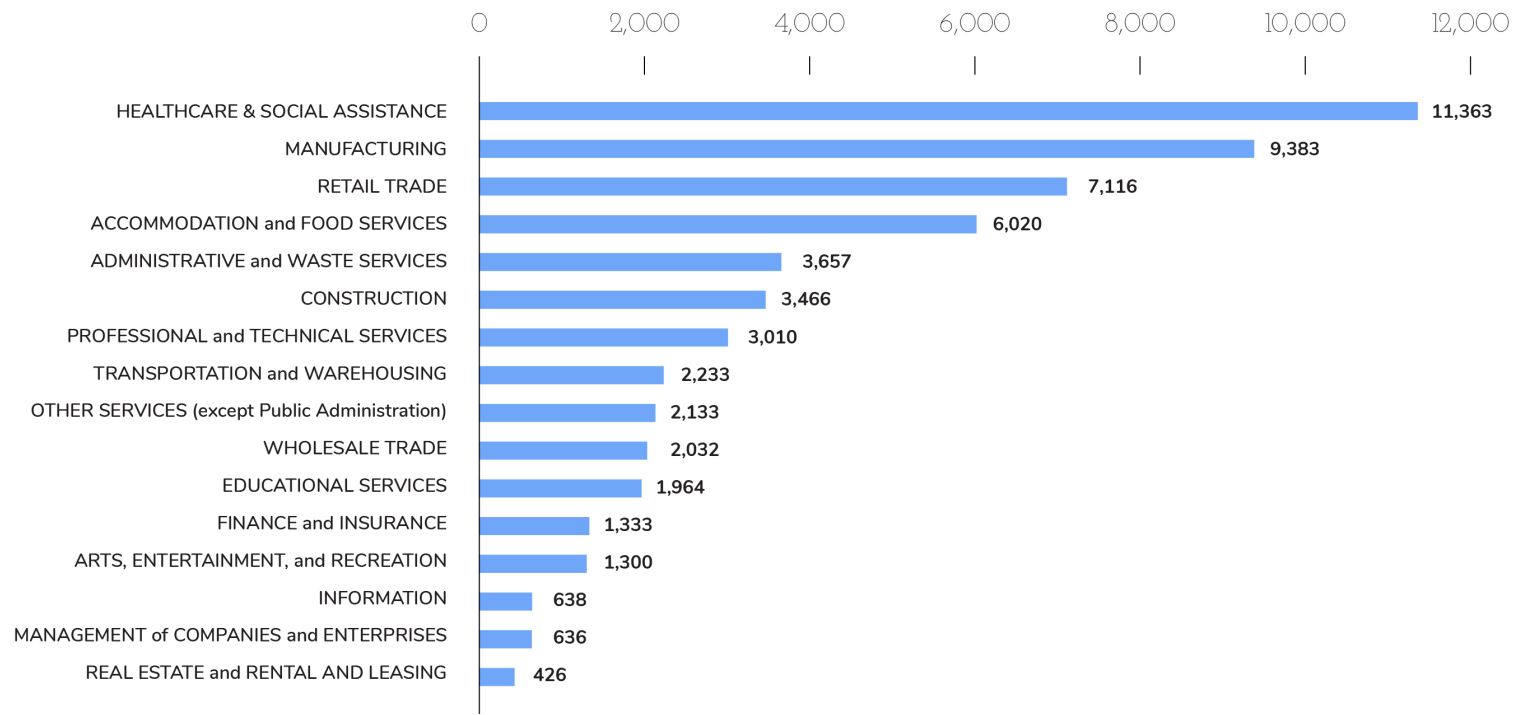


Figure 4: Private wage and salary employment

Source: NP calculations from BLS.gov & BEA.gov

### Full-time workforce needs are met by people outside the region



The Lower Connecticut River Valley region has 17,000 fewer full-time jobs than residents who are employed. 68% of the region's residents leave the region for employment. This is a slight increase from 2014. Middletown represents 31% of employment (~7900 jobs) for people living in the region. This commuting pattern means that an estimated \$4.2b in income is brought into the Lower Connecticut River Valley from outside the region versus an estimated \$2.2b leaving the region from commuting workers (source: BEA Table CAINC91).

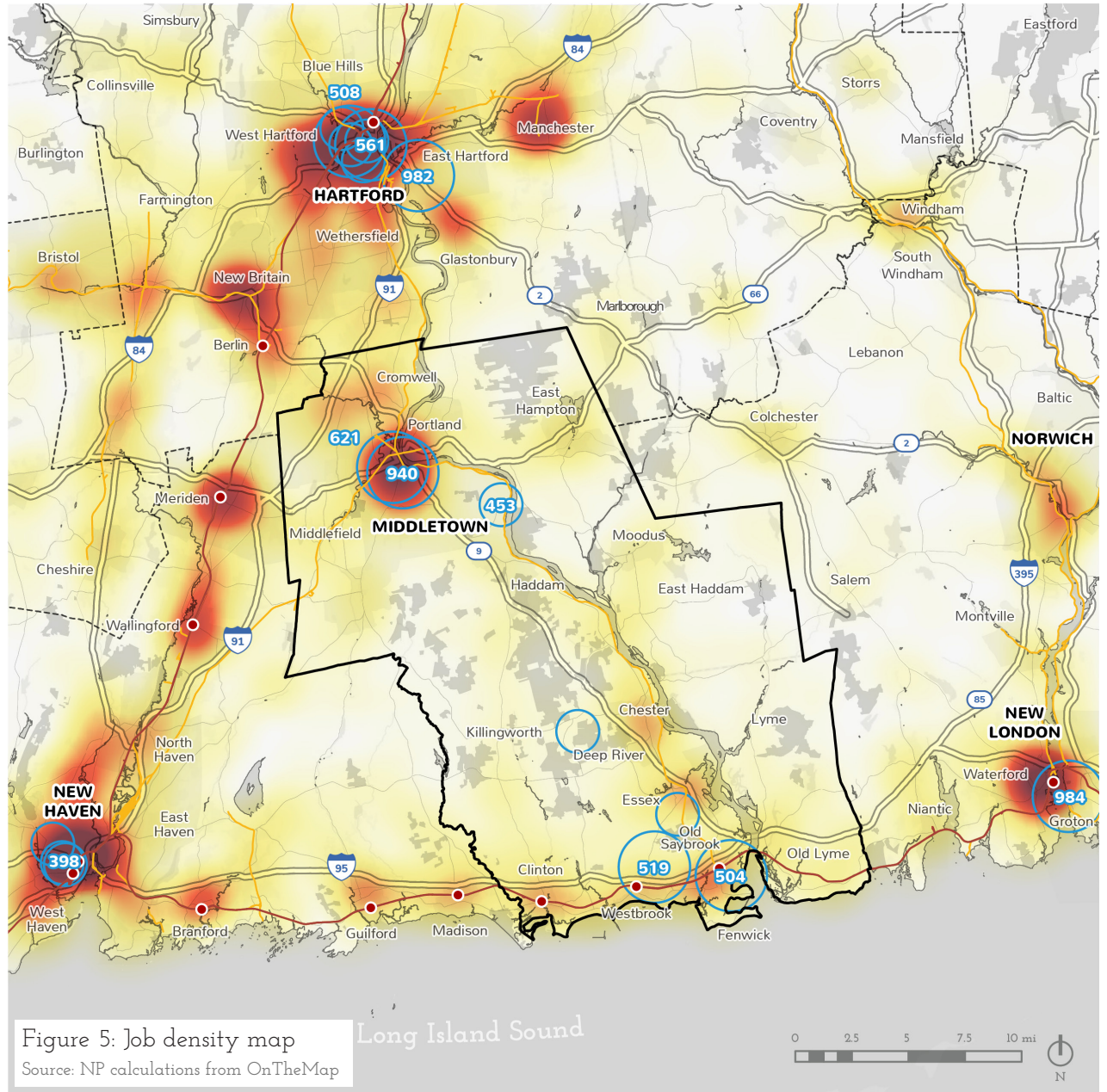


Figure 5: Job density map  
Source: NP calculations from OnTheMap



# Wages

The regional average wage is approximately \$62,000. Manufacturing is the only large employment sector (top 5) that pays above the regional average.

Wages on a nominal basis have increased by 26% since 2014. The 2014 annual average wage was \$48,806. On a real wage basis, the 2014 wage average equaled \$55,874 in 2021, therefore wages in inflation adjusted terms have increased approximately 10%.

A critical consideration for many of these sectors is: will the Lower Connecticut River Valley region have housing priced to be able to live in the region?

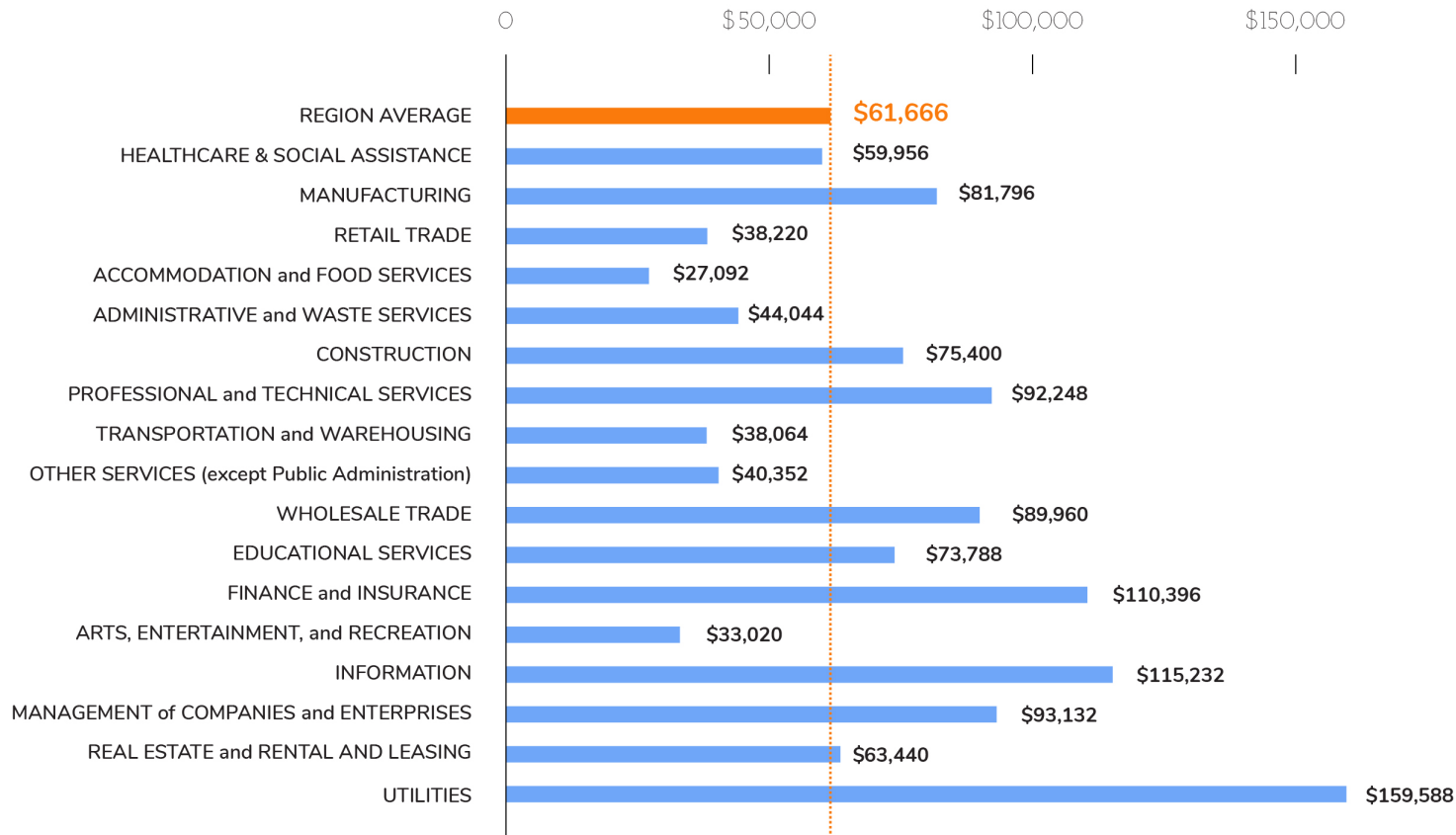


Figure 6: 2021 Average annual industry wages in order of employment

Source: NP calculations from BLS quarterly QCEW

## Incomes

Total income in the Lower Connecticut River Valley Region in 2021 was over \$12b, up from \$9.9b in 2014. Median household income in the region is approximately \$91,000, up from just over \$77,000 in 2014.

The growth of retirement income versus income from wages is a key income trend with important implications. Earnings from wages has fallen from 70% in 2014 to 66% in 2021. Retirement income has increased to 16% of income in 2021 compared to 12% in 2014. Because Connecticut communities are dependent on property taxes to fund local government services and schools, the increase in fixed income may impact housing affordability and local government funding over the next decade.

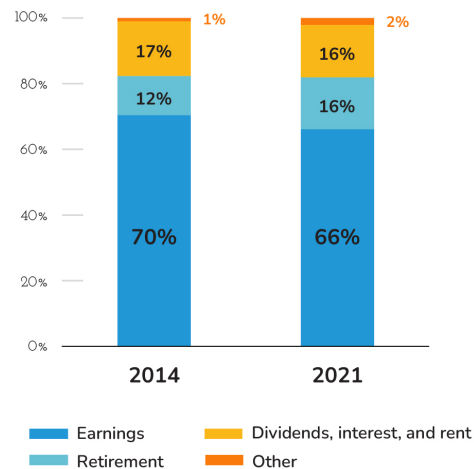


Figure 7: Sources of income  
Source: NP analysis of ACS 5 year estimates ; Income derived from BEA GDP accounts Table CAINC30. Poverty rate and income inequality: NP analysis of PolicyMap county and place data with adjustments made for Old Lyme and Lyme

Some key indicators of economic equity have changed slightly since the GrowSmart plan:

- Poverty rate increased from 6.7% (2014) to 7.7% in 2021. The state poverty rate is 10.1%
- Income inequality<sup>1</sup> increased slightly from .43 to .45. By comparison the state has an income inequality index of .5. (the US is .49). This means that the region has lower income inequality than the state or the nation as a whole.

1 Income inequality gini coefficient created by US census bureau. It measures the distribution of income across the population. A score of 1.0 means total inequality. A score of zero means total income equity.

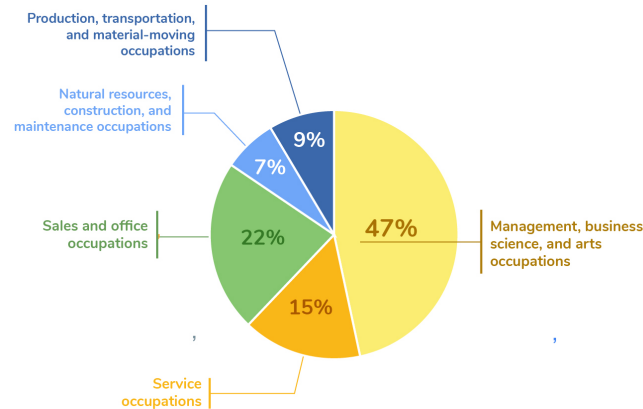


Figure 8: Occupational mix  
Source: NP calculations from LEHD data and ESRI population demographics

## Population and Workforce

As noted earlier, the majority of the region's workforce needs are met by workers from outside the region. Some of this appears to be due to the industry mix. For example, the region hosts approximately 1500 jobs in the finance and insurance sector but nearly 5000 residents work in this sector. The region also has relatively high employment concentrations in service industries but nearly 50% of workers are in management and business occupations.

Since the 2016 GrowSmart report, the workforce has gradually been getting older and more diverse. 28% of the workforce is over 55, this is an increase from 25% in 2014, and 36% of the manufacturing sector workforce is over

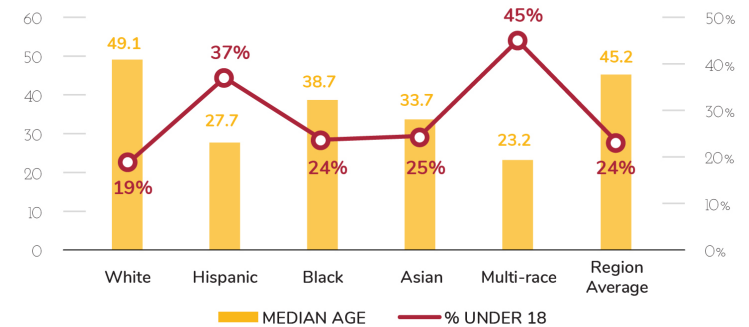


Figure 9: Population diversity  
Source: NP calculations from ESRI population demographics



55. The workforce is also getting more diverse: 17% of the workforce was non-white and 12% had Latino ethnicity in 2021. These are both substantial increases over 14% and 9.7% respectively from 2014.

The aging of the workforce and its increasing diversity are opportunities for the Lower Connecticut River Valley as the regional population undergoes key shifts over the next several years: an estimated 38,000 are under age 19 and 36% will be Latino and/or non white compared 26% of the total population.

## Housing

Public and stakeholder input through the CEDs process echoed the Regional Plan of Conservation and Development (RPOCD) call for additional housing in the region to help address affordability concerns and provide housing for the workforce. In July of 2022 RiverCOG published the Regional Housing Plan (RHP).

The report identified a housing market that is increasingly under stress:

- 31% of residents are cost burdened
- The “average” job does not generate a high enough income to purchase the median home
- Limited housing availability in general and limited choices in types of housing make it difficult to support a diverse population and workforce
- Limited new construction

Several of the RHP objectives and recommendations reinforce the CEDs findings and recommendations

## Regional Housing Plan Objectives

The plan has 6 primary objectives:

1. Diversify the Region’s population in terms of age, race, and socio-economic status.
2. Create a resilient workforce in the region.
3. Ensure that people who work in the Region can live in close proximity to their jobs.
4. Diversify housing stock for non-traditional households.
5. Examine ways to make the existing housing stock, office, and retail space in the Region functional for a changing population.
6. Encourage orderly creation of housing of different styles and types throughout the Region near existing areas of development, employment, and transit.

<https://www.rivercog.org/plans/rhp/>

## Industry concentrations

Industry concentrations can be measured by location quotients (LQs), which at the most basic level measure the relative concentration of an industry relative to the state or nation as a whole. This has been used by economic development officials as a way to target industries.

The North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) codes have 6 levels with 2 digits representing a general sector down to 6-digit NAICS (e.g., NAICS 23 equals construction while NAICS 23810 equals drywall contractors). An LQ of 1.00 means the region is equal to the nation. Greater than 1.00 means has a higher concentration of employment than the nation.

Due to the size of the region, the lowest level of industry identification for an LQ analysis is a 3-digit NAICS code not subject to business privacy / disclosure restrictions.

Manufacturing has the largest location quotient at the sector level, including at the 3-digit industry level. Education and Arts, Entertainment Recreation also have higher than typical concentrations, however, not in any specific industry area. The opportunities these sectors present to the Lower Connecticut River Valley economy depends on available infrastructure, land area, and “fit” with the communities.

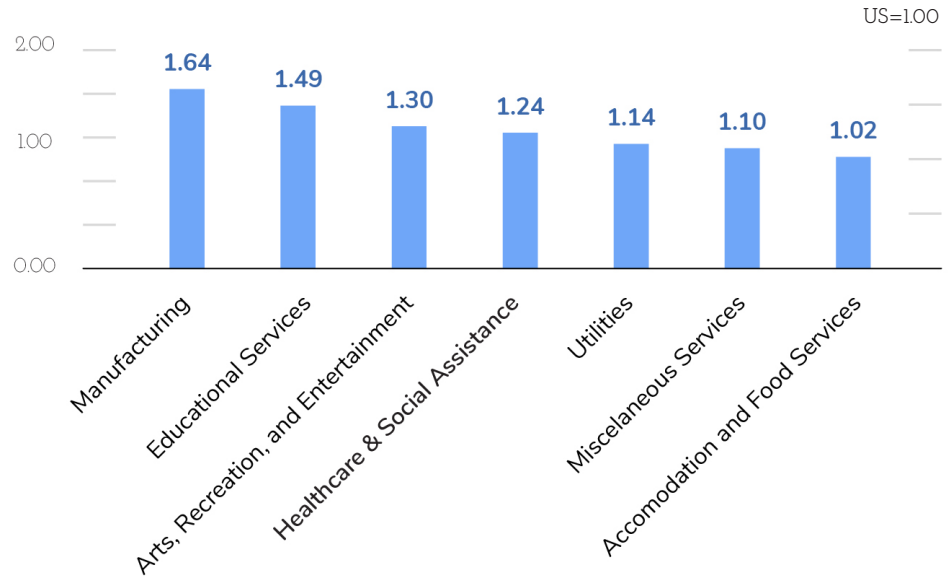


Figure 10: 2-digit sectors LQs

Source: BLS OCEW LQ calculations

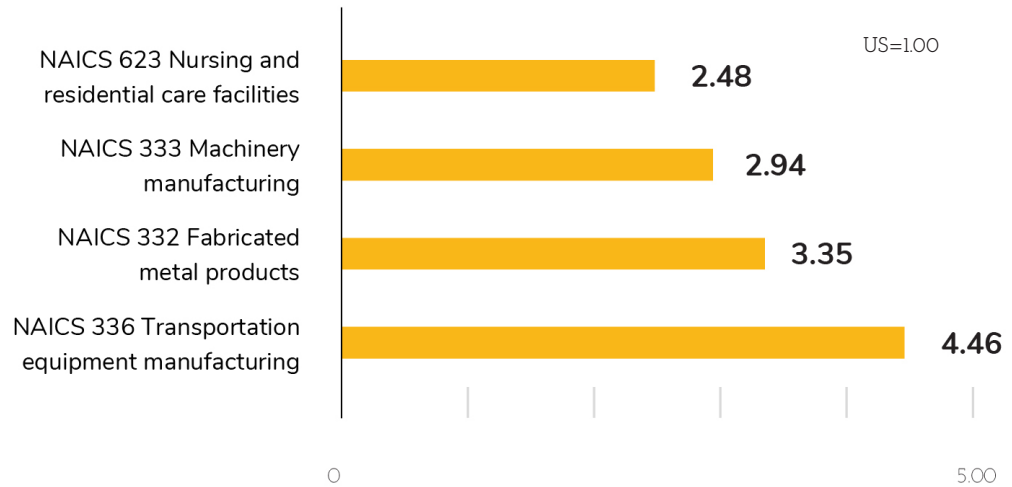


Figure 11: Top 3-digit industry LQs

Source: BLS OCEW LQ calculations

## Four economic drivers

In 2016, the GrowSmart plan noted that the region had 4 different types of economies:

- Traded goods – manufacturing led sector which remains a key driver of the local with employment base of at least 14,000.
- “Lifestyle” economy – businesses and people that have the flexibility to be anywhere total approximately 13,000 employed and self-employed people. Of note is the emergence of some new areas such as non-store retailers and electronic markets / brokers approaching 1,000 employees,
- Resident economy – driven by local residents as well as seasonal households (5600)<sup>1</sup>. This remains a critical component of the region’s economy and employment base. The aging of the population and an increase in seasonal residents could have a dramatic impact on this sector
- Tourism economy – driven by the region's location, natural amenities, plus historic and cultural resources is explained in detail on the next page.

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1 RPOCD

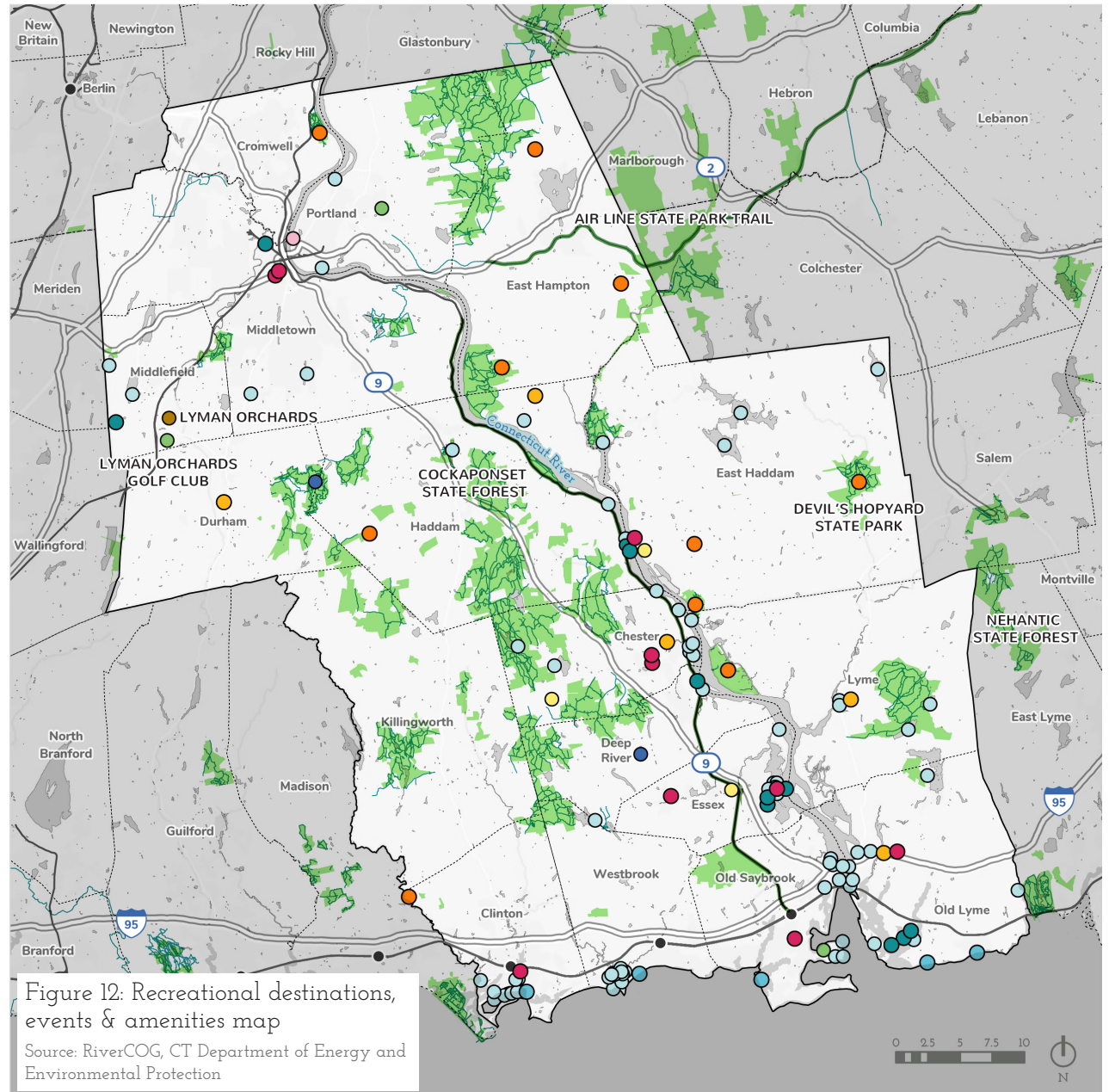


## Tourism and recreation sector snapshot

One of the limits of the LQ analysis is that it does not provide insights about an industry ecosystem or cluster. For example, the Arts, Recreation, and Hospitality sector in the Lower Connecticut River Valley pre-pandemic was at least a \$3b sector. There is a wide range of historical, cultural and outdoor amenities that span the Lower Connecticut River Valley. Several of these amenities are large generators of visitors. For example, state parks had an attendance of 860,000 visitors in 2021, or about 10% of total state park visitorship. Demand led to occasional closures of several regional parks based on available capacity.

However, it should be noted that infrastructure to support some of these assets, such as parking, restrooms, and signage, is limited in some locations.

The region has more overnight stay capacity than is evident by available hotel rooms, including 500 - 600 AirBNBs, 1400+ campsites with various levels of utilities, and transient marina slips.



# Opportunities for physical development

## Tax base growth

Connecticut cities and towns are dependent on property taxes as their principal source of revenue to support their communities. Only three Lower Connecticut River Valley communities have seen commercial and industrial values as a percent of their tax base increase since 2001.

Tax base diversification becomes an important consideration as the region’s population ages with a growing number of residents on fixed incomes.

Considering options to grow and diversify the tax base within the context of the communities is an important consideration for the region.

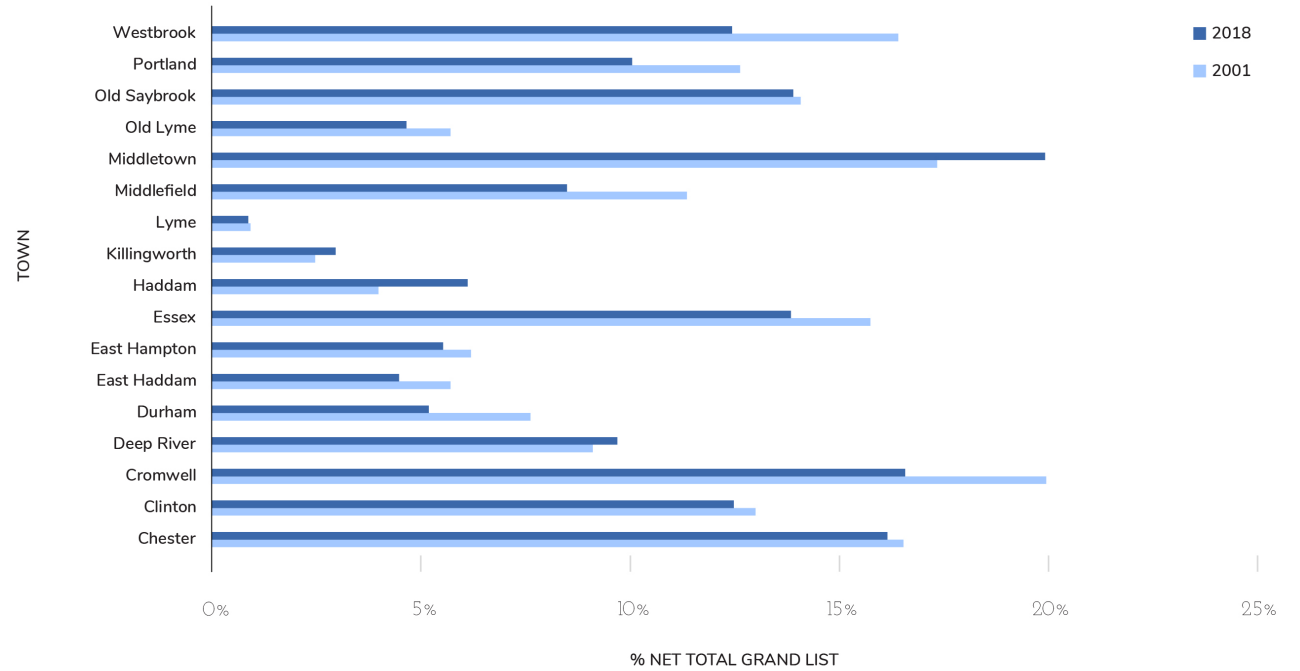


Figure 13: Commercial and industrial grand list % of net total grand list, FY 2001 - FY 2018  
 Source: CT Office of Policy and Management



2018 flooding in Chester



2018 Liberty Street bridge collapse in Chester

## Resilience and hazard mitigation

In 2020 RiverCOG updated the region’s Natural Hazard Mitigation Plans and conducted an assessment of the resilience of 15 of its 17 communities to natural hazards and disasters (access the plan here: <https://www.rivercog.org/plans/natural-hazard-mitigation-plan/>.)

A number of natural hazards were identified and ranked in terms of potential impact on the region. The highest score was 50.8; the lowest score 14.3. The four highest for additional consideration and planning emphasis included:

Hazard Type	Score	Hazard Planning Consideration
Winter Storms	50.8	Significant
Flood / Storm Surge	43.6	Significant
Severe Weather	33.87	Significant
Hurricanes (wind)	35.07	Significant

As part of this study estimated economic impacts were calculated using value at risk methodologies (VAR). This CEDs examined the four threats considered significant to understand the potential impacts based on the value at-risk methodology. For some of these categories there can be tremendous differences to potential losses based on the risk category, location and severity of the event. For example, the winter storm VAR estimates \$7.6b in building value at risk. Alternatively, a riverine flooding situation is measured against the type of event ranging from a 10 year flood even to a 500 year flood event. A 10 year flood event may impact 15 communities with a potential loss level of \$460m (2020) and a 500 year flood event totaling over \$1.4b. Similarly, losses from hurricanes show a range from \$2.6m to more than 1.4b for a 1000 year wind event. A 100 year wind event estimates losses at \$144m with approximately 2800 buildings sustaining damage based on the model.

As a follow up to the Natural Hazard Mitigation plan and the CEDs, RiverCOG intends to work with the regional business community and the communities at highest risk to develop a Resiliency and Recovery plan. This initiative will launch in 2023.

### FEMA Flood Zones

Special Flood Hazard Areas (SFHA) are defined as the area that will be inundated by the flood event having a 1-percent chance of annual flooding. Mandatory flood insurance purchase requirements and floodplain management standards apply. SFHAs are labeled as Zone A - 1% annual chance of flooding (without Base Flood Elevation), AE - 1% annual chance of flooding (with Base Flood Elevation), AO/AH - 1% or greater chance of shallow annual flooding, VE - 1% or greater chance of flooding with storm waves (High Risk Coastal Flood Hazard).

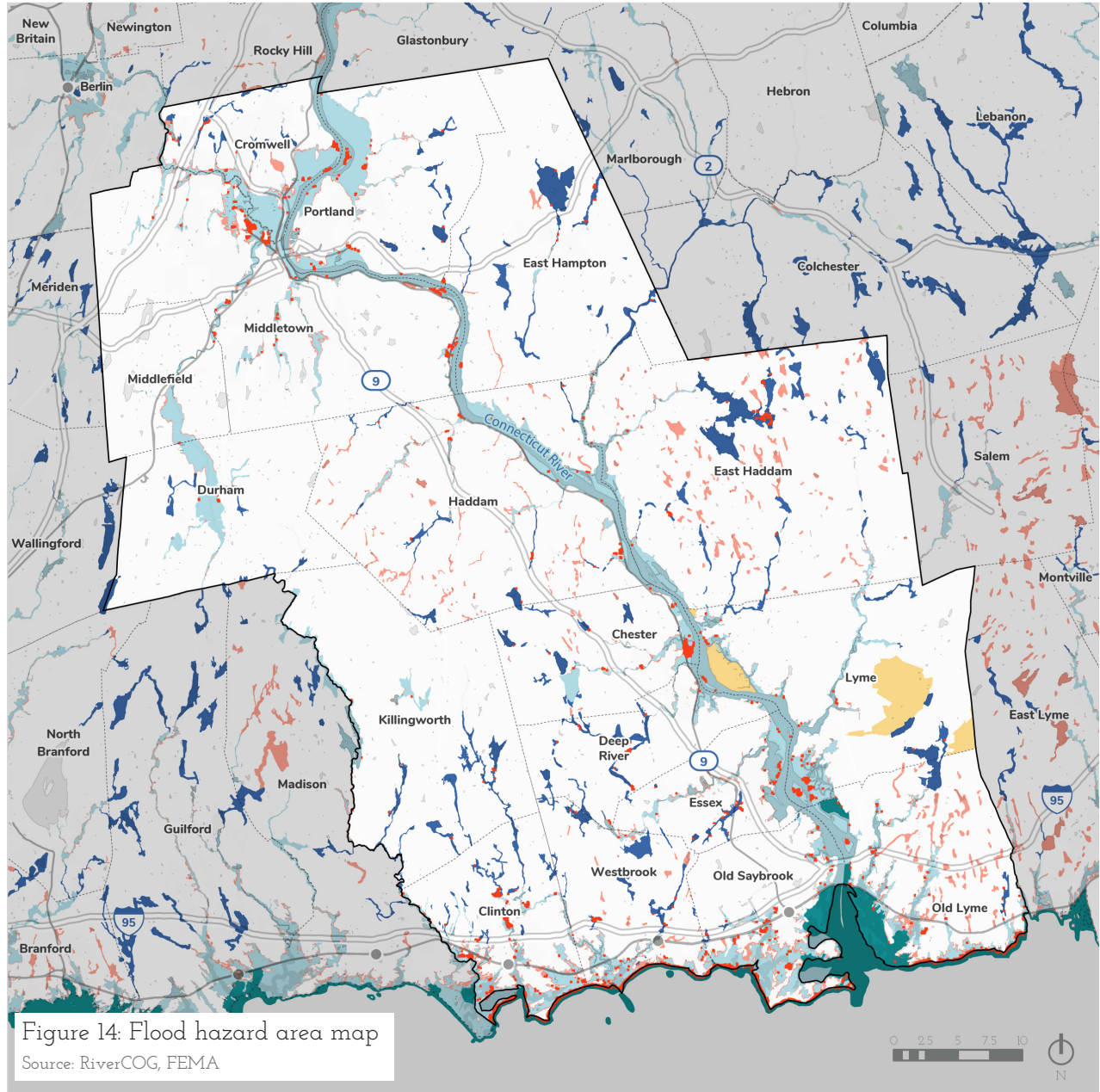


Figure 14: Flood hazard area map  
Source: RiverCOG, FEMA

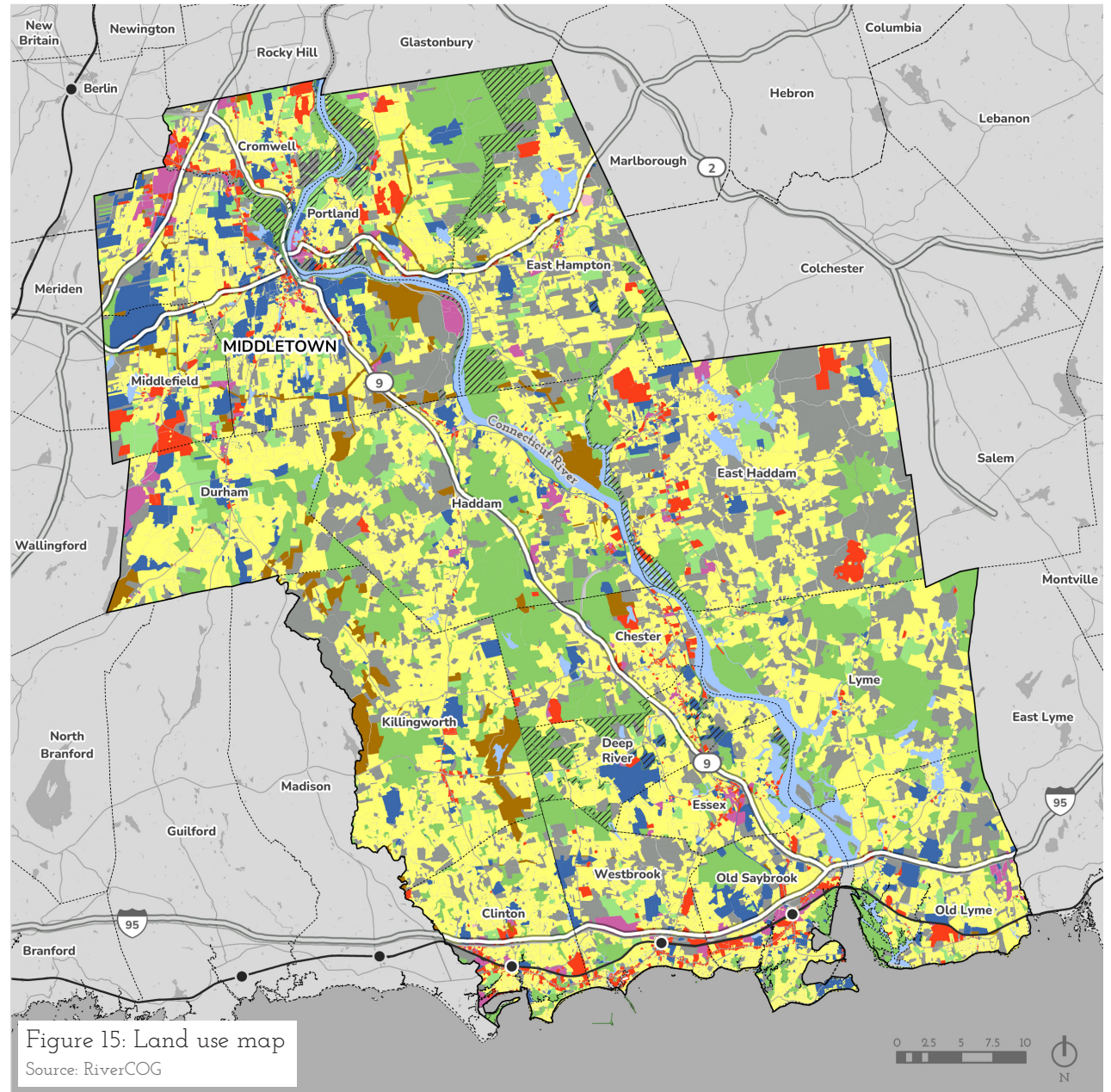
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| <p><b>High Risk Flood Areas - Special Flood Hazard Areas (SFHA)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><span style="color: red;">■</span> 100-year Floodplain Land Cover</li> <li><span style="color: blue;">■</span> A</li> <li><span style="color: lightblue;">■</span> AE / AH / AO</li> <li><span style="color: darkblue;">■</span> VE</li> </ul> | <p><b>Low to Moderate Risk Flood Areas - Non-Special Flood Hazard Areas (NSFHA)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><span style="color: lightcoral;">■</span> B - 0.2% Annual Chance Flood Hazard</li> <li><span style="color: yellow;">■</span> Area Not Included</li> </ul> |
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## How are we qualifying physical growth potential?

Local growth is feasible, but the systems need to be in place regionally for that to happen. Future development will require further exploration of developable vacant land on a site-specific basis, within the context of the Lower Connecticut River Valley's Northern, Interior, and Shoreline subareas.

Additional determinants for development potential include:

- Parcel size.
- Slope percentage - Any parcels with slopes of 10% or more pose considerable challenges to development.
- Environmental considerations - Presence of farmland, brownfields, wildlife habitats, etc.
- Access to utilities - Sewer lines and public water, among others.



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| <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:yellow; border:1px solid black;"></span> Residential | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:lightpink; border:1px solid black;"></span> Mixed Use    | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:brown; border:1px solid black;"></span> Utility                     |
| <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:orange; border:1px solid black;"></span> Commercial  | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:lightgreen; border:1px solid black;"></span> Agriculture | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:grey; border:1px solid black;"></span> Vacant Land                  |
| <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:purple; border:1px solid black;"></span> Industrial  | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:green; border:1px solid black;"></span> Open Space       | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:lightblue; border:1px solid black;"></span> Water Feature           |
| <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:blue; border:1px solid black;"></span> Institutional | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; background-color:lightgrey; border:1px solid black;"></span> Right of Way | <span style="display:inline-block; width:15px; height:15px; border:1px solid black; border-style:dashed;"></span> Conservation/Floodplain Zoning |



# Identifying strategic areas for growth

The first step in assessing growth potential in the region involved understanding what land was available. After narrowing down to land within four targeted zoning categories, the process identified how much land was free

and clear of regulatory and environmental limitations for development. These environmental regulatory constraints included aquifer protected areas, protected open space, state parks, forests and DEEP property,

wetlands, flood hazard areas, and gateway conservation areas. Finally, parcels were analyzed by size and vacancy as primary factors in determining potential for development.

Figure 16: Process for identifying available land  
 Source: RiverCOG, CT Dept of Energy and Environmental Protection, Interface Studio



## How much free and vacant land is available in the Lower Connecticut River valley area within targeted zoning categories?

There isn't an abundance of developable vacant land in relation to the region. Developable vacant land represents only 0.5% of the region's total acreage. Among the available vacant parcels for development, those with less than 5 acres in area are potentially residential, inaccessible or not developable/financially sound. Non-vacant developable land, which represents an additional 1% of the region's total area, has development potential pending further exploration.

### Criteria for DEVELOPABLE VACANT LAND

- are zoned commercial or industrial
- on visual inspection did not show significant impediment of water, wetland, etc.
- had clear access (was not landlocked)
- was not indicated by town as having any major issues

**1,485 ACRES (339 PARCELS)** are vacant land within the targeted zoning area, clear of zoning restrictions and environmental regulations.

of which

**1,201 ACRES (66 PARCELS),** or 19% of available vacant parcels, are **5 acres and over.**

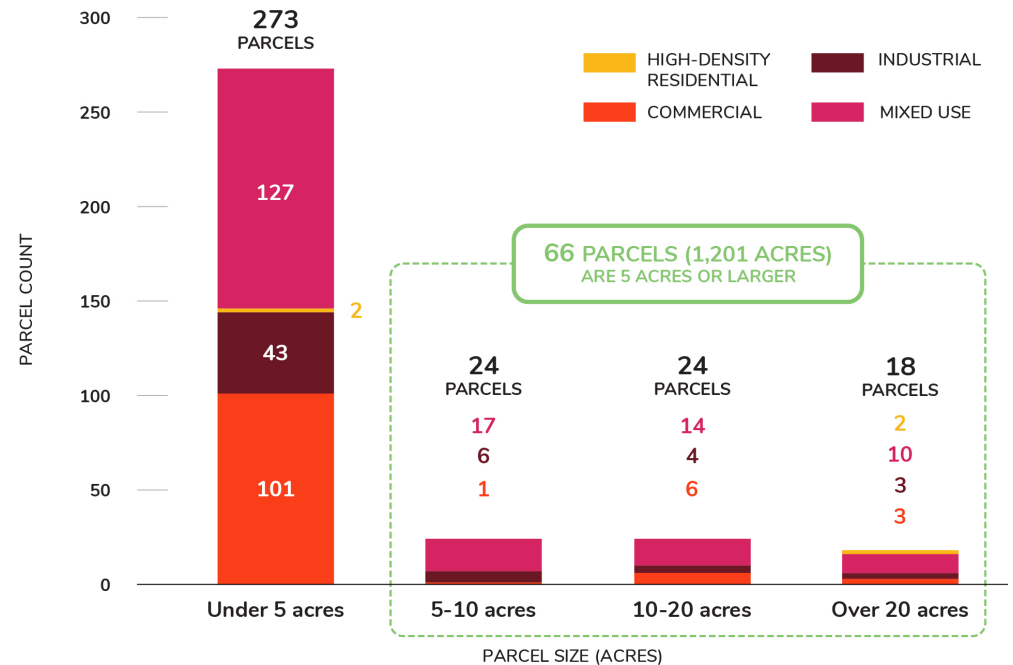


Figure 17: Breakdown of available land by parcel size

### Available developable land

**692 ACRES  
(124 PARCELS)**  
IN THE NORTHERN SUBAREA\*  
are vacant land within the targeted  
zoning area, clear of zoning restrictions  
and environmental regulations.

of which

**598 ACRES  
(30 PARCELS),**  
or 9% of all available vacant parcels,  
are **5 acres and over.**

\*Subareas are based on the RHP Market  
Study which looked at housing market  
potential.

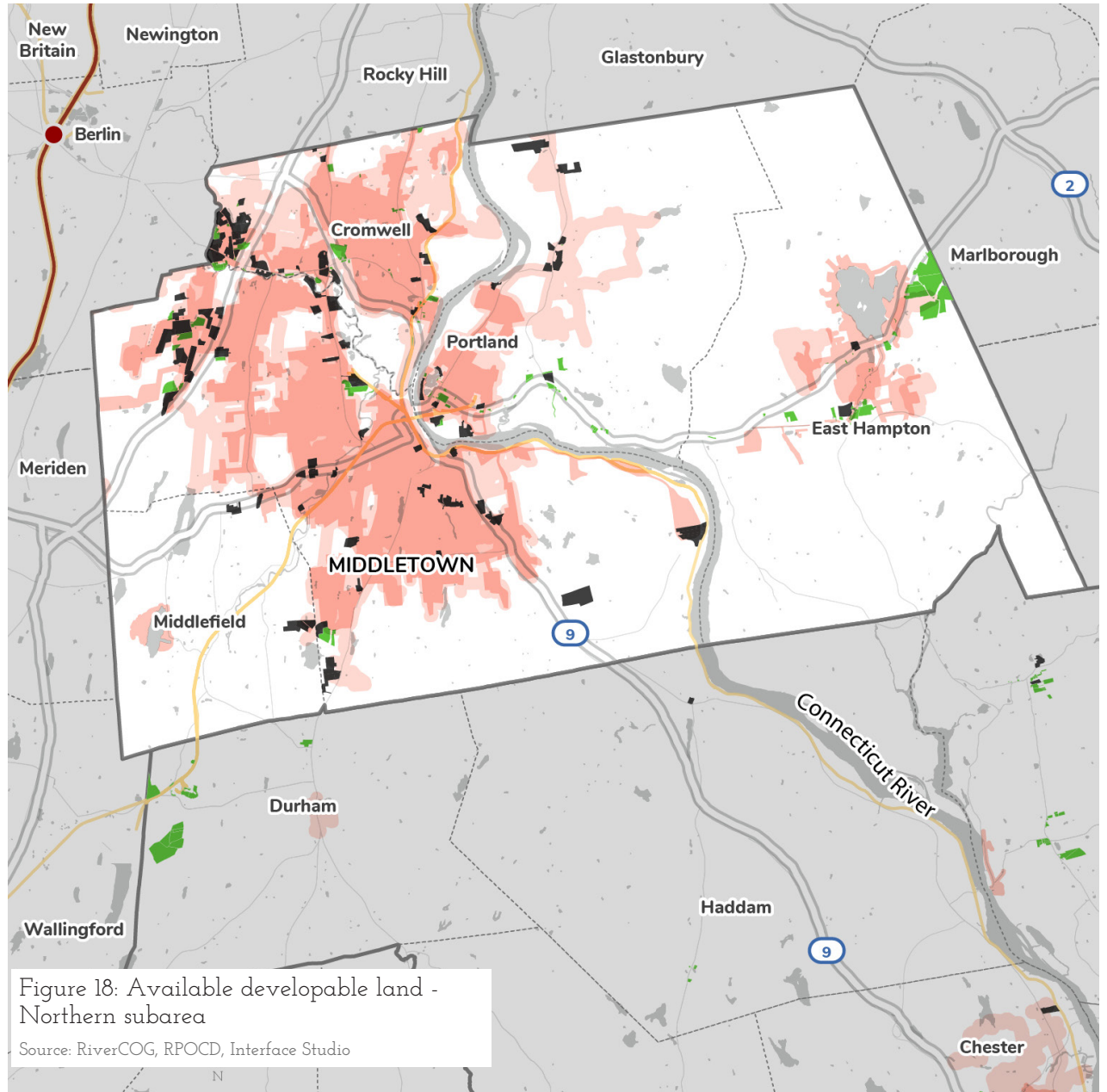


Figure 18: Available developable land - Northern subarea  
Source: RiverCOG, RPOCD, Interface Studio

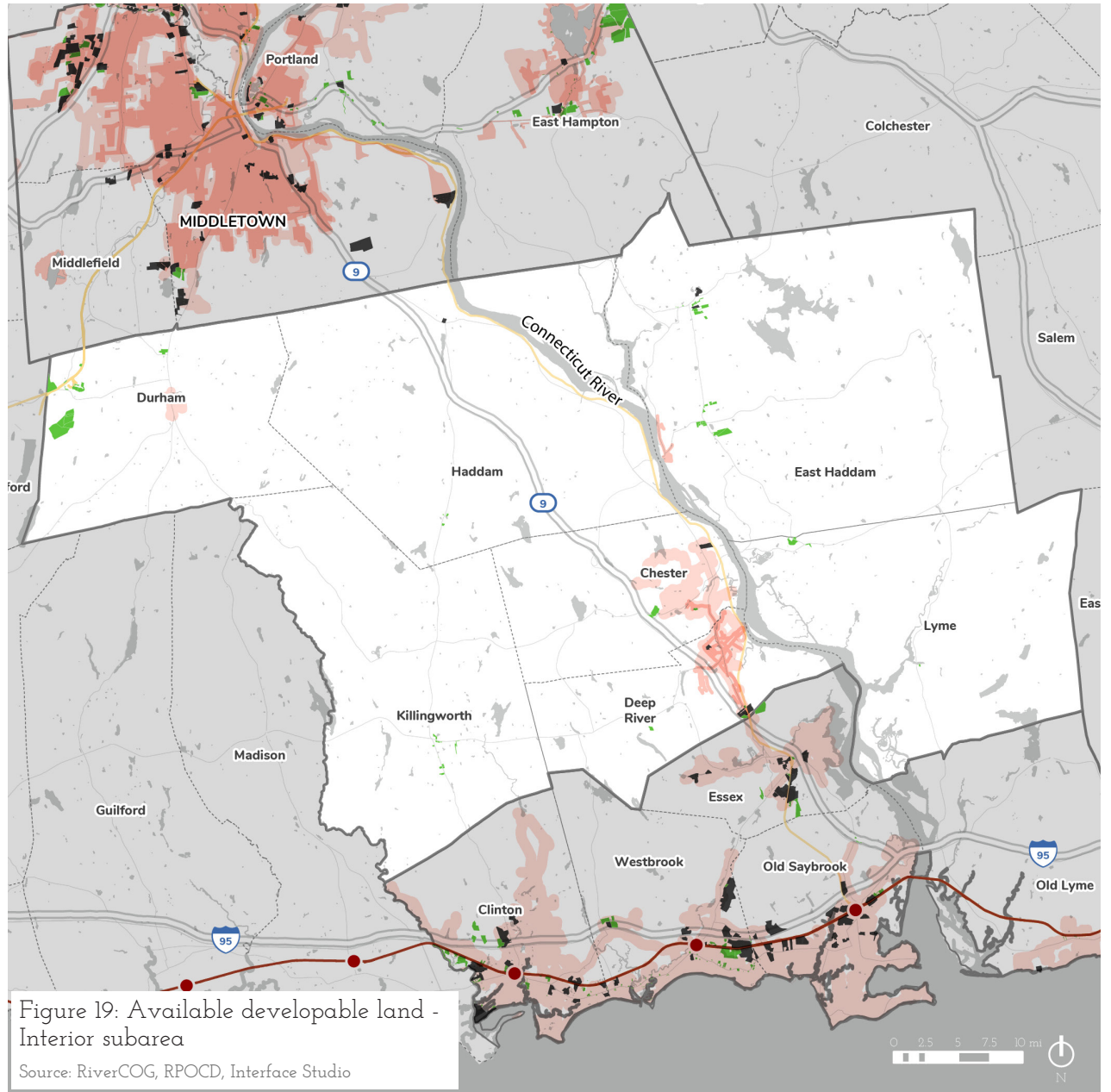
- Subarea Boundary
- Town Boundaries
- Utilities Service Area
- Sewer Service or Public Water
- Sewer Service and Public Water
- Passenger Rail
- Freight Rail
- Available Vacant Land, ready for redevelopment (free and clear of zoning and environmental constraints, 5 acres or larger in size)
- Underutilized Land (non-vacant commercial or industrial land with under 35% built area)

## Available developable land

**364 ACRES  
(78 PARCELS)**  
IN THE INTERIOR SUBAREA  
are vacant land within the targeted  
zoning area, clear of zoning restrictions  
and environmental regulations.

of which

**274 ACRES  
(17 PARCELS),**  
or 5% of all available vacant parcels,  
are **5 acres and over.**



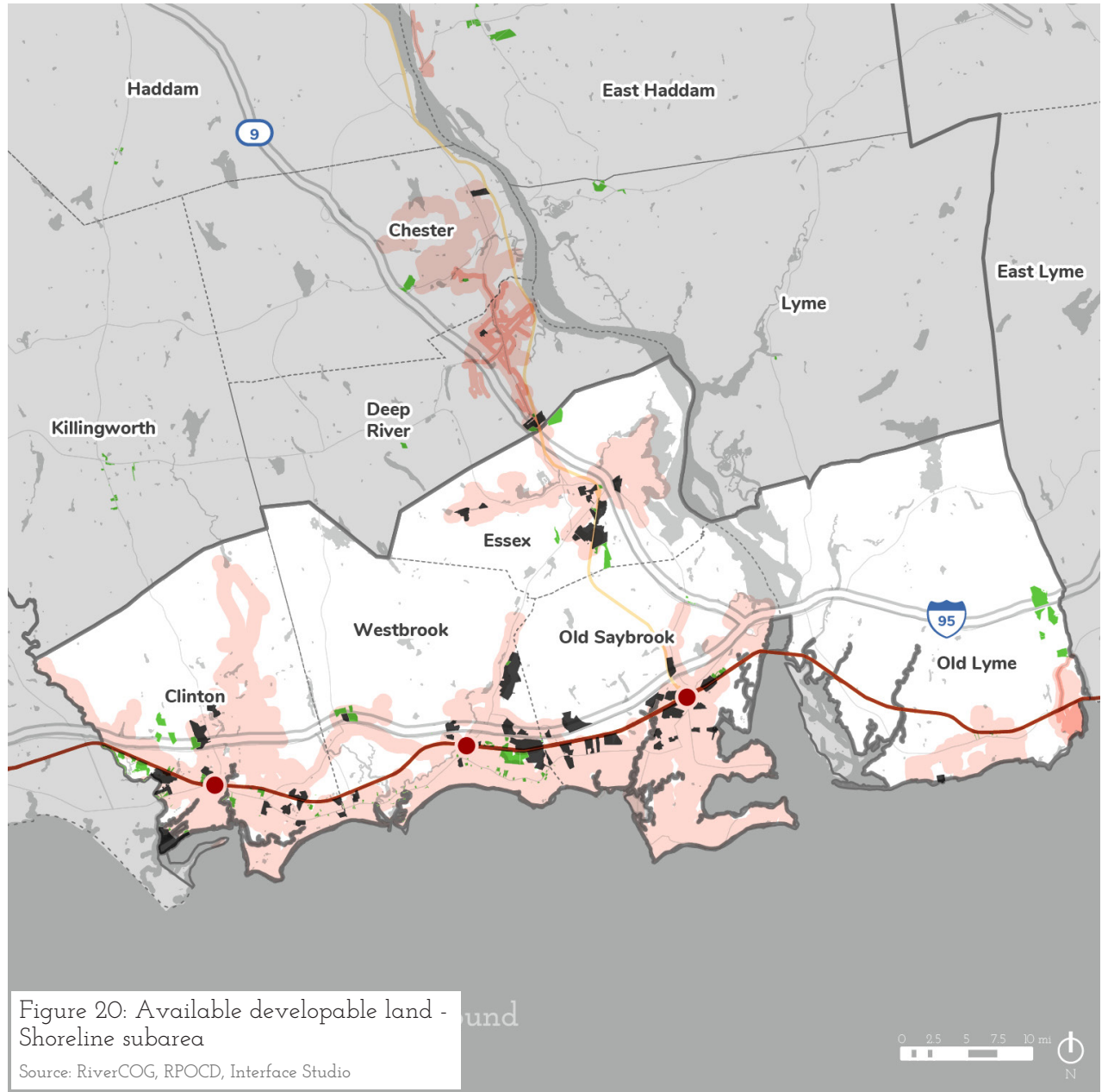
- Subarea Boundary
- Town Boundaries
- Utilities Service Area
- Sewer Service or Public Water
- Sewer Service and Public Water
- Passenger Rail
- Freight Rail
- Available Vacant Land, ready for redevelopment  
(free and clear of zoning and environmental constraints, 5 acres or larger in size)
- Underutilized Land  
(non-vacant commercial or industrial land with under 35% built area)

### Available developable land

**430 ACRES**  
**(137 PARCELS)**  
IN THE SHORELINE SUBAREA  
are vacant land within the targeted  
zoning area, clear of zoning restrictions  
and environmental regulations.

of which

**329 ACRES**  
**(19 PARCELS),**  
or 6% of all available vacant parcels,  
are **5 acres and over.**



- Subarea Boundary
- Town Boundaries
- Utilities Service Area
- Sewer Service or Public Water
- Sewer Service and Public Water
- Passenger Rail
- Freight Rail
- Available Vacant Land, ready for redevelopment (free and clear of zoning and environmental constraints, 5 acres or larger in size)
- Underutilized Land (non-vacant commercial or industrial land with under 35% built area)

# 3 COMMUNITY VOICES

RiverCOG meeting, Riverfront Park, Portland





# 01 What is the economic development environment in RiverCOG?

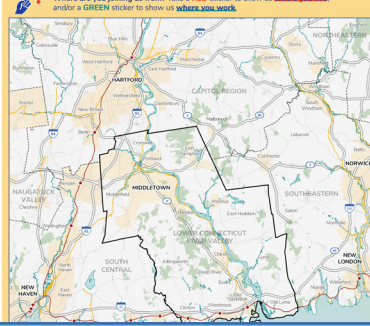


First things first. What is a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)?

How did the CEDS come about?

- This effort comes at the heels of previous planning efforts, including:
  - The 2021 Regional Plan for Conservation and Development (RPOCD), created to address the issues of individual towns more holistically through a regional framework. Economic development, along with housing and a regional multimodal transportation system, will be key in making the RPOCD vision a reality.
  - The 2022 Lower Connecticut River Valley Region Housing Market Study, which set the foundation of the Regional Housing Plan.

The RiverCOG Area sits on a strategic location within the region.



Why have one now?

- The American Rescue Plan, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act provide federal resources to support regional economic development and infrastructure investment initiatives.
- Many of the funding opportunities are competitive applications. These applications typically require identifying whether the program is consistent with a regional comprehensive economic development program.
- COVID-19 also brought significant changes in the region in terms of workforce trends and the need for reliable infrastructure, among others, which a new CEDS may be able to address.

The planning area for the CEDS is comprised of the seventeen municipalities covered by the 2021 RPOCD, including all of Middlesex County, and Old Lyme in New London County. This is meant to build community post plans, and to establish a shared baseline for data gathering and...

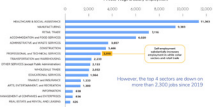
# 02 What sustains RiverCOG's economy today?



Quick facts about the RiverCOG economy

- Pre-pandemic GDP: \$9B in 2019 (SBE) in 2020, 2019 distribution manufacturing was 20%, retail stores was 16%, and healthcare and social services, and tourism ranged between 3-5%.
- Businesses (2021): 9541 + self-employed vs. 900 over 10 years.
- Employment (2021): 80k including self-employed an essentially flat with declines in self-employment.
- Average wages 2021 - \$62,000 up on an inflation adjusted basis by 30.3%.
- Three RIVERCOG communities (Middletown, Haddam, Killingworth) have seen commercial and industrial values as % of their tax base increase since 2001.

Key employment sectors have not changed since 2014.



A snapshot of the region's tourism and outdoor recreation industry (cont.)

- RiverCOG State Parks had an attendance of 960,000 visitors in 2021, or about 10% of total state park visitation.
- Demand led to occasional closures of several regional parks based on available capacity.



Who's working here?

Since 2014, the workforce population has become older and more diverse, with changes in age, ethnicity, and racial composition.



RiverCOG's workforce needs are met by people outside of the region.



A snapshot of the region's tourism and outdoor recreation industry

- The Arts, recreation, and hospitality sector pre-pandemic was at least a 53c sector.
- Infrastructure to support some of these assets, such as parking, restrooms, and signage, is limited in some locations.
- The region has more overnight stay capacity than may be understood:
  - 1400+ campsites with various levels of utilities.
  - Transient marina slips.

# 03 Where are there opportunities for growth in the region?



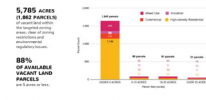
Identifying strategic areas for growth

The first step in assessing growth potential in the region involved understanding what land was actually available:

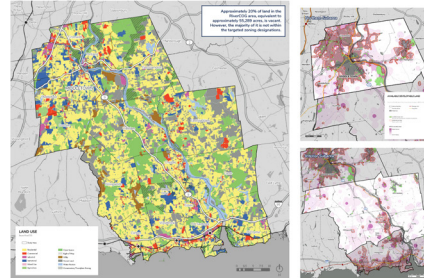


After identifying how much land was free and clear for development, parcels were analyzed by size and corresponding zoning designation as primary factors in determining potential for development.

How much free and vacant land is available in the RiverCOG area within the four zoning categories?



- There isn't an abundance of developable vacant land in relation to the region - Developable vacant land represents 2% of the region's total acreage.
- Among the available vacant parcels for development, those with less than 5 acres in area are potentially residual, inaccessible or not developable/financially sound.
- Non-vacant developable land, which represents an additional 33% of the region's total area, has development potential pending further exploration.



How are we qualifying growth potential?

- Local growth is feasible, but the systems need to be in place regionally for that to happen.
- Future development will require further realization of developable vacant land on a site-specific basis, within the context of RiverCOG subareas: Northern, Interior, and Southern.
- Additional determinants for development potential include:
  - Parcel size.
  - Shape percentage - Any parcels with slopes of 10% or more pose considerable challenges for development.
  - Environmental considerations - Presence of farmland, openfields, wetlands, etc.
  - Access to utilities - Sewer lines and public water, among others.

Vacant parcel calculations and location in the region are preliminary based on the 2021 RPOCD data, and were only based on recent development and updates from the various towns.

# Public input

RiverCOG, in partnership with the consultant team, held 15 stakeholder group interviews to learn about challenges and opportunities across municipalities and business sectors. The number of attendees ranged from two to ten per meeting, with approximately 65 participants in total. Each of the region's 17 towns was represented by a combination of planning and economic development professionals and commission members, as well as elected and appointed officials. Industry representation included banking, real estate, education, and tourism as well as major employers.

The team also conducted two public engagement workshops, one in the northern part of the region and one in the southern part of the region, to share data and give the public an opportunity to weigh in on economic development priorities. The workshops attracted approximately 15 participants in the first and 25 participants in the second for a total of approximately 40 participants.

Workshop boards





Workshop in Old Saybrook

# SWOT analysis of the Lower Connecticut River Valley region

In 2021, RiverCOG completed a Regional Plan of Conservation and Development (RPOCD), the equivalent of a Comprehensive Plan. The RPOCD process had more than 300 participants

Upon review of the stakeholder discussions as well as the community survey, it was determined that the economic development elements SWOT analysis from the RPOCD reflected the current commentary as well. Accordingly, the SWOT from the RPOCD was refined down to the essential economic development elements, and adopted as the SWOT for the CEDs.

## Strengths

- Significant natural resources including farmland, forest, wetlands and waterbodies
- Connecticut River, sound, and shoreline
- Local stewardship of environmental resources
- Central location in the State
- Highway access (I-95, Route 9, and other State highways)
- Rail Lines (Shore Line East, Amtrak, and freight)
- Major institutions and industries including universities/colleges, hospitals, manufacturing, research, bioscience, and technology
- Highly-educated workforce and highly-skilled trades persons and contractors
- Small villages, towns, and cities, organized around the landscape such as the shore, river, and farmland
- Maintained historical integrity of the architectural past
- Strong spirit of community and commitment to volunteerism

## Weaknesses

- Substantial reliance on single occupant vehicles for a majority of trips
- Limited distribution of high-speed Internet which is impeded by topography and landscape
- Limited access to and integration of public transit service, bicycle, and pedestrian facilities
- Limited locations for innovative business development
- Lack of cooperation/partnership in attracting new innovative businesses
- Limited public utilities in large portions of the region, especially along the I-95 corridor
- Ratio of residential to industrial acreage
- Limited number of skilled workers and the need for technical job training
- Lack of diversity (age, race, ethnicity, etc.) in some areas of the region, young adults are underrepresented
- High cost of housing and inadequate affordable housing options, particularly for those working in or serving our towns
- Limited access to resources for low-income populations

## Opportunities

Expanded protection of open space through strategic targeting of the most ecologically significant lands

Infill development and redevelopment of underutilized land

Support and incentives for agriculture

Expanded access to public transit, bicycle, and pedestrian facilities for all segments of the population

Expanded high-speed Internet network

Access to capital for start-ups and growing businesses

Potential schools and venues for technical job training

Technology sector and medical/bioscience/manufacturing innovation hub

Outward movement of New Yorkers

Engagement with the business community

Diversify housing stock, including more affordable options, to attract a younger demographic and retain seniors

Improve connectivity between neighborhoods, rural areas, and village and town centers

## Threats

Climate change and sea level rise

Loss of biodiversity

Invasive species

Aging infrastructure

Dependence on state and local subsidies for transit service

Lack of expansion of high-speed Internet and associated lack of competitiveness

Unreliability of electrical grid and Internet service

Loss of job sectors such as manufacturing, retail, and agriculture

Migration of industry out of the region

Less engagement of institutions in innovation

Reluctance or resistance of towns or communities towards innovation or change, including resistance to challenge existing zoning regulations

Population loss, including additional loss of young adults

Insufficient infrastructure and services to support aging population

Prohibitive cost of housing/living

Erosion of community organizations due to lack of participation and loss of volunteers, partially due to aging out of participants

Failure to address issues surrounding equity and inclusion

# Perspectives on Key Economic Issues

## 13 Discussion groups

(involving every community)

### General findings:

- Limited capacity – marketing resources, staff, volunteers, occasionally technical expertise
- Increasing concern around finding qualified volunteers to offset staffing limits
- Limited or no infrastructure particularly to execute on town center / village center plans
- Housing attainability (deeply subsidized and middle income + aging in community housing)
- Overcoming NIMBYism

## 5 Business groups

### General findings:

- Workforce and housing
- Better access to and in the region
- More marketing of region
- Focus on activities across age groups, life stages (families, retired, young professionals) and ethnicities

## 90+ Survey responses

The greatest barrier to business growth and development in the region:

[84 responses]

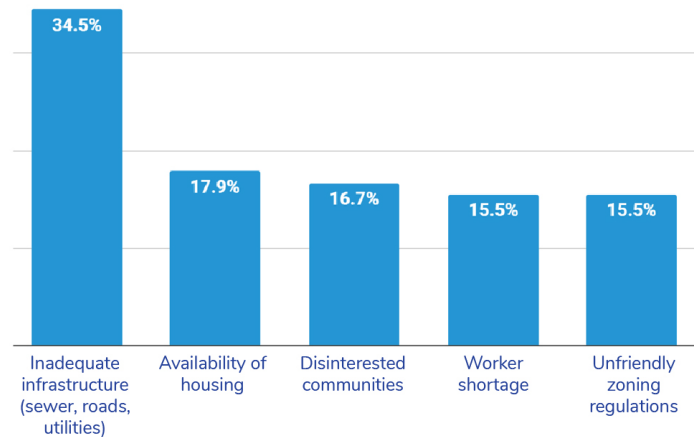


Figure 21: Survey results - barriers to business growth and development

The Lower Connecticut River Valley has:

[93 responses]

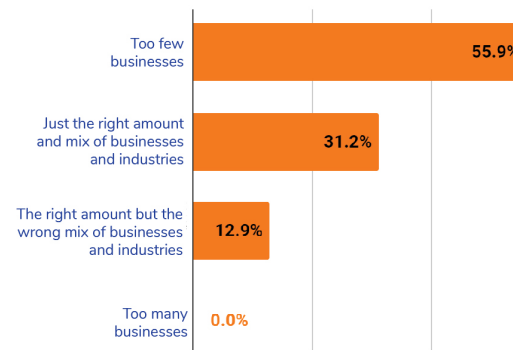


Figure 22: Survey results - business amount

From an economic development perspective, the region should focus on:

[78 responses]

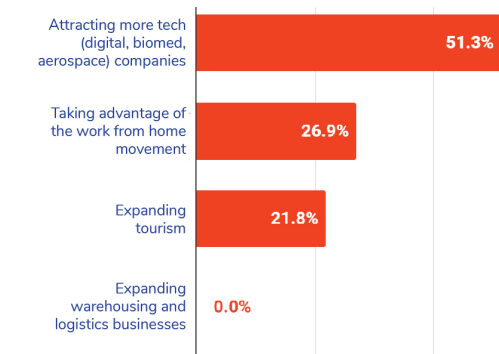


Figure 23: Survey results - regional focus

## Survey responses (continued)

### Potential initiatives to promote economic development:

[92 responses]

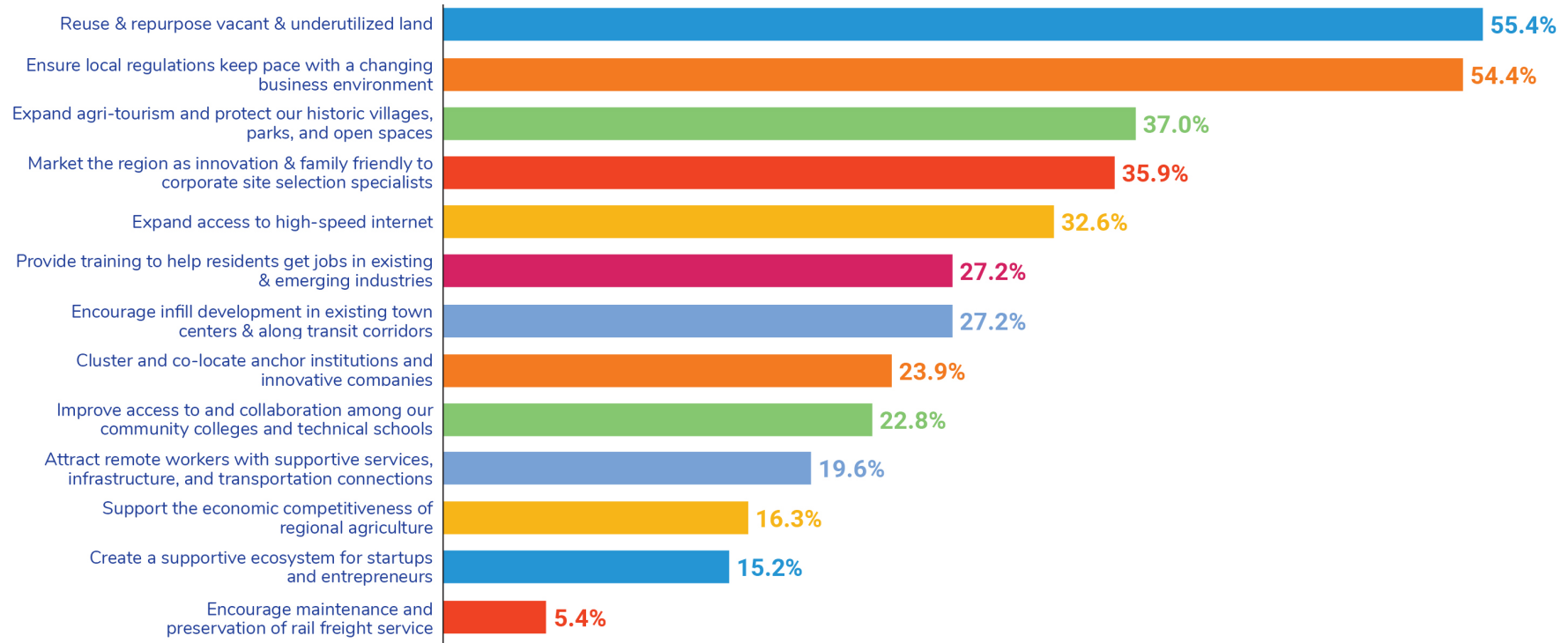


Figure 24: Survey results - potential economic development initiatives

# Prioritization of economic development issues and initiatives

The priority exercises from the October workshops were transformed into a survey in order to gather information in the field. It was sent to members of the Middlesex Chamber of Commerce Side Street to Main Street program, which is the minority-owned business community in the region.

Additionally, live input was collected from the region’s business community, at a regular meeting of the Middlesex Chamber of Commerce, and was gathered at table events outside of the Westbrook Town Hall, Middletown City Hall, and Old Saybrook Shoreline East train station.

Issues #1 and #3 in Figure 25 below were identified as the most important economic development issues and are also reflected in the survey results from Figures 21-24 which highlighted tech companies, infrastructure, and housing as areas of focus.

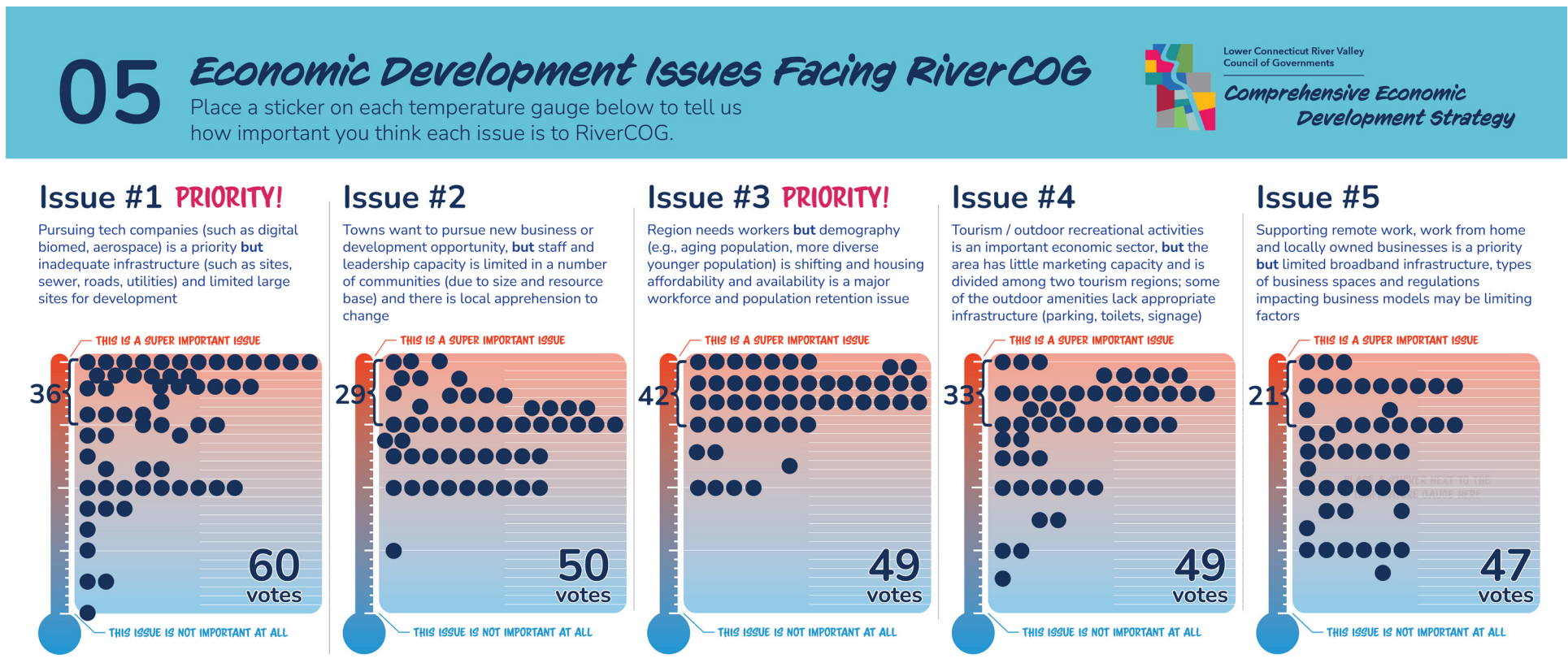


Figure 25: Prioritization of economic development issues



# 4 STRATEGIC DIRECTION

Rand Building, Middletown







# Vision

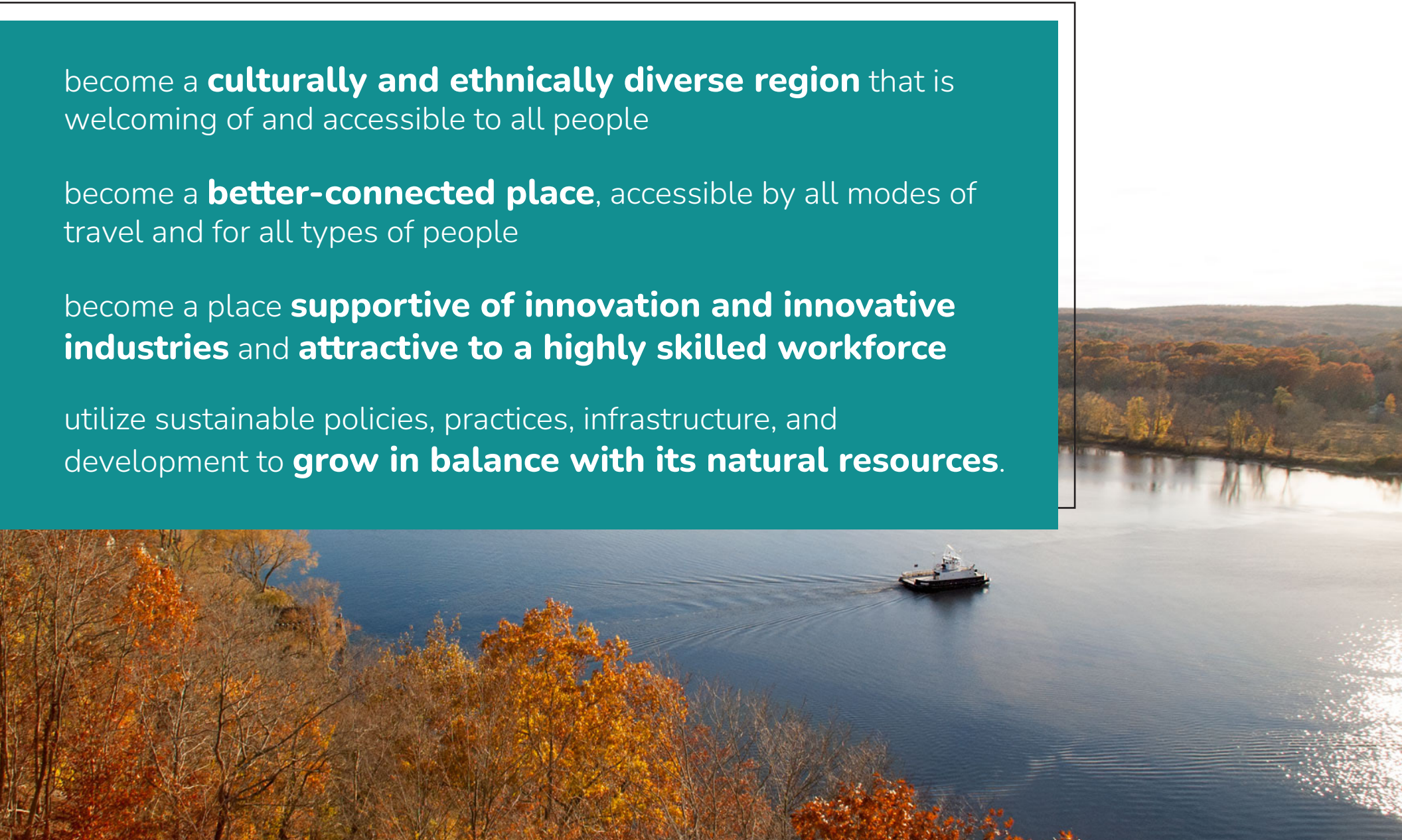
The Lower Connecticut River Valley region will:

become a **culturally and ethnically diverse region** that is welcoming of and accessible to all people

become a **better-connected place**, accessible by all modes of travel and for all types of people

become a place **supportive of innovation and innovative industries** and **attractive to a highly skilled workforce**

utilize sustainable policies, practices, infrastructure, and development to **grow in balance with its natural resources.**



# Strategic Direction

1



Providing the capacity and resources to promote a growing and equitable economy

2



Supporting the development of economic infrastructure

3



Encouraging sustainable & resilient communities

4



Enhancing high quality of life options for all residents

## Rationale

**Providing the capacity and resources to promote a growing and equitable economy** The Lower Connecticut River Valley is an economically vibrant area of Connecticut. It faces the same statewide business climate issues (healthcare costs, cost of doing business) as the rest of the state, and has limited ability to take direct actions to improve those conditions. However, with the right resources and focus it can continue to be a prosperous and high quality of life community.

**Supporting the development of economic infrastructure** Economic infrastructure is defined as not only traditional infrastructure such as roads, water, sewer but also broadband, buildings and connectivity to jobs. A number of these issues were identified as top priorities for the region and its future economic viability.

**Encouraging sustainable & resilient communities** This is a key priority for the region as evidenced by the Regional Plan of Conversation and Development (RPOCD), and the local planning documents of our communities. The engagement process reinforced that better utilization of our existing developed area is one of the top development priorities for the region.

**Enhancing high quality of life options for all residents** Housing has been identified in the RPOCD as well as this CEDs process as one of the top issues facing the region. The Regional Housing Plan provided an in-depth assessment of the housing dynamics and needs of the region.

1

**Providing the capacity  
and resources to  
promote a growing and  
equitable economy**



Providing the capacity and resources to promote a growing and equitable economy



## 1.1 Establish a regional economic development resource within the region that can support the region’s municipalities with grant writing, project management, and technical expertise

### Rationale

The region consists of communities that vary significantly in size and budget capacity. During the engagement process, it was stated numerous times that the limitations on staffing and expertise to pursue a range of economic development projects is a real limitation and barrier. A shared resource that each community can access will significantly increase the region's ability to respond to a changing economy.

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Increase RiverCOG staffing capabilities and/or utilize Middlesex Chamber of Commerce to create an economic development coordinator for the region	Regional	Short
Work with the region’s municipalities, existing economic development professionals/commissions, and chambers of commerce to define the roles and responsibilities of economic development coordinator	Local; Regional	Short
Compile and create economic development resources, including but not limited to technical guides, funding opportunities, and a repository of priority projects and opportunities across the region, to share on the RiverCOG website	Regional; State	Medium

**Partners** State: OPM, DECD, DEEP, etc.  
 Local: municipal government in all of its capacities (governing bodies, departments, boards, commissions, and committees, etc.)  
 Regional: Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce, Estuary Transit District, Regional Agriculture Council, surrounding COGs, and similar

Private/Non-Profit: This includes major institutions, non-profit organizations, businesses, and advocacy groups and organizations.

**Timeframe** Short - 1-2 years  
 Med - 3-5 years  
 Long - 5+ years/ongoing

Providing the capacity and resources to promote a growing and equitable economy



## 1.2 Develop a regional brand / identity and create marketing campaign that can help market the region to tourists, businesses, and potential residents

### Rationale

The region is split between two state tourism districts. Each of these districts have major centers of gravity with established brands and assets (Hartford and Mystic Country). However, region is its own unique geography with a mix of assets and physical attributes that deserve its own branding and marketing.

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Obtain consultant for purpose of brand development	Local; Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Medium
Conduct public outreach regarding brand preference	Local; Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Medium
Work with a marketing consultant to launch marketing campaign	Local; Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Medium

Providing the capacity and resources to promote a growing and equitable economy



### 1.3 Create a regional outreach and advisory program that can assist the region in engaging with underrepresented groups and ensure a range of diverse voices have opportunities to influence the direction of the region

#### Rationale

The region is gradually becoming more diverse with younger populations containing a higher percentage of Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) than the overall population. Ensuring that this population is engaged in the future of the Lower Connecticut River Valley is important as the region addresses its workforce and housing needs.

#### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Identify groups in the region that have not been historically well represented in the planning process	Local; Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Short
Develop contacts with key individuals or organizations representative of these groups	Local; Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Short
Establish regular dialogue and a pipeline for ongoing engagement	Local; Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Long

Providing the capacity and resources to promote a growing and equitable economy



## 1.4 Create a regional leadership development program, in coordination with the Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce, Old Saybrook Chamber and other community business groups, to provide a training resource for current and future municipal commissioners, municipal officials, and other volunteer positions

### Rationale

A number of the Lower Connecticut River Valley communities are run and managed by volunteer boards and groups in key roles such as planning, economic development, conservation, and First Selectman roles. During the engagement process, it was also noted there are relatively few millennial volunteers on these necessary boards and commissions. Encouraging and creating a pipeline of future leaders is vital to the success of the region's communities.

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Host a forum with municipal commissioners to identify areas where training and education could be most beneficial	Local; Regional	Medium
Identify existing leadership training resources that can be leveraged to support a leadership development program	Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Medium
Create training modules that can be viewed on-line and hosted on the RiverCOG website	Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Long



2

# Supporting the development of economic infrastructure





## 2.1 Pursue opportunities for broadband expansion (wired and wireless) across the region

### Rationale

Broadband access particularly wireless broadband is spotty across the region.

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Partner with municipalities to identify areas of inadequate wireless broadband coverage.		
Work with the state and federal government to draft an updated definition of broadband coverage that adequately reflects the shortcomings of broadband use in the region.		
Identify opportunities to leverage municipally owned space on existing utility poles for improved coverage.		

Supporting the development of economic infrastructure



## 2.2 Support technical expertise in furthering alternative wastewater treatment options

### Rationale

Wastewater management alternatives to expensive sewer system construction is an important element for potential development in the region.

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Compile research and data on wastewater management trends.		
Work with industry experts to better understand the potential for new technologies in the region.		
Host information sessions and provide educational materials to municipalities that allow them to evaluate the use of wastewater management alternatives.		

Supporting the development of economic infrastructure



## 2.3 Evaluate potential for culinary / food products incubator to support the region's agricultural industry

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Work with the Regional Agriculture Council to identify needs for culinary/food product incubator support.	Local; Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Short
In partnership with municipalities, identify potential locations for shared industrial space that could support culinary/food product development for the region's farmers.	Local; Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Short
Work with municipalities to identify and amend potential regulatory barriers that would prohibit the region's farmers from expanding into culinary/food product development.	Local; Regional	Medium
Facilitate partnerships between the Regional Agriculture Council, municipalities, and private/non-profit enterprises to create shared facilities for culinary/food production.	Local; Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Long

Supporting the development of economic infrastructure



## 2.4 Emphasize increased connectivity of employment centers with multi-modal transportation access

### Rationale

Various studies have identified connectivity to employment as a key issue in helping to manage the housing affordability concerns and equity considerations in the region. Moreover, because the areas eligible for future employment type development are limited and scattered across the region, connectivity will become increasingly more important.

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Identify existing and proposed priority areas for employment centers across the region	Local; Regional	Short
Work with municipalities to ensure that zoning regulations support bicycle and pedestrian connections in and around these employment centers	Local	Short
Provide tools to help municipalities pursue first and last mile solutions that connect employment centers to public transportation options	Local; Regional; State	Medium
Provide a channel between municipalities and the transit district to ensure adequate public transportation access and infrastructure is in place for projects in major employment centers	Local; Regional; State	Short



## 2.5 Provide supportive amenities and services for remote workers, including but not limited to creative options for shared workspaces

### Rationale

Remote work is a permanent part of the fabric of the future workplace. The region has a large population that commutes to office-type settings for work in Hartford and New Haven. The region has also demonstrated its ability to attract self-employed workers and other professionals who seek the type of lifestyle offered by the area. However, it's also been demonstrated that flexible workspaces are desired for remote and self-employed workers. Given the size of the communities, not all of them can support flexible options. Working together may enable options that could not exist separately.

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Conduct public outreach to determine the needs of the region's existing remote workers	Local; Regional	Short
Compile best practices data and information related to supportive amenities and shared workspaces for remote workers	Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Short
Work with the region's municipalities to create amenities and shared workspaces that support remote workers in town centers	Local; Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Long

Supporting the development of economic infrastructure



## 2.6 Secure resources for high priority infrastructure projects

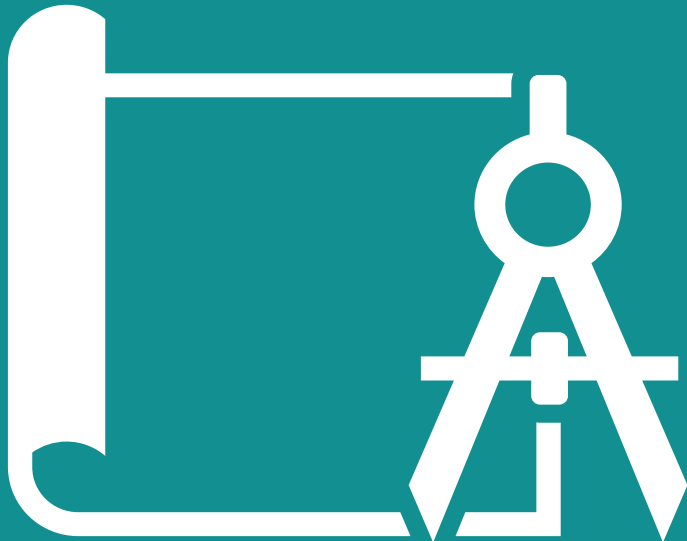
### Rationale

The region’s communities have many infrastructure needs that are identified in the appendix. These range from roadway improvements to streetscapes, multi-modal infrastructure, water/sewer needs, and broadband enhancements. A number of these projects are beyond the fiscal capacity of the local communities and will require state and federal resources. The shared resource identified earlier can help with grant writing and application development for these competitive funding sources.

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Work with the region’s municipalities to maintain a complete list of priority infrastructure projects across the region	Local	Long
Match projects with available funding or project partners where appropriate	Local; Regional; State	Long

# 3 Encouraging sustainable & resilient communities





Encouraging sustainable & resilient communities



## 3.1 Identify high priority reuse development opportunities and secure resources to begin process of revitalization **PRIORITY!**

### Rationale

Across the region exist several high priority redevelopment site opportunities. These have been identified in the appendix. Some of these sites will be complex due to potential environmental remediation needs or lack of appropriate infrastructure.

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Build on analysis of vacant and underutilized parcels and structures in priority innovative areas	Local; Private/Non-Profit	Short
Work with municipalities to study capacity for development, redevelopment, or reuse of selected parcels or structures	Local; Private/Non-Profit	Medium
In partnership with municipalities, compile an on-line repository of vacant and underutilized parcels and structures, including development, redevelopment, or reuse potential, and host on the RiverCOG website	Local; Private/Non-Profit	Long

Encouraging sustainable &amp; resilient communities



## 3.2 Prioritize infill development in town centers and underutilized commercial corridors **PRIORITY!**

### Rationale

Communities across region have opportunities for infill development appropriate to their local context. The public process identified pursuing these opportunities as more desirable than new greenfield development. In some cases, infrastructure improvements are needed and/or new zoning needs to be put into place. Other recommendations address the infrastructure needs as well as zoning considerations.

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Support communities in facilitating discussions with existing property owners about redevelopment opportunities using additional staff resource identified in recommendation 1.1	Local; Regional	Short
Work with municipalities to identify priority areas for infill development	Local	Short
Assist municipalities in identifying zoning regulations that inhibit infill development in priority areas	Local	Short
Provide tools and resources for revising zoning regulations to encourage infill development in priority areas	Local; Private/Non-Profit	Long

Encouraging sustainable & resilient communities



## 3.3 Discourage intensive development along environmentally sensitive areas or high-risk zones

### Rationale

The region takes environmental protection seriously as the environment and the abundant natural amenities are a critical part of its identity. Given the emphasis on infill and targeted redevelopment, supporting non development in environmentally sensitive areas increases the attractiveness of infill options. It is also a key part of a resilience strategy to reduce the amount of the region's economy and built environment subject to natural hazard risk.

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
In partnership with municipalities, develop a standard for identifying environmentally sensitive areas and high-risk zones – methodology should be based on the RPOCD and NHMP	Local; Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Short
Develop additional standards that could be incorporated into local zoning regulations to prevent overdevelopment of these areas	Local; Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Medium

Encouraging sustainable &amp; resilient communities



## 3.4 Create a Business Resiliency and Recovery Plan for businesses as well as government

### Rationale

The Natural Hazards Mitigation Plan identified and quantified the potential risk areas and economic losses. This is the logical next step of this plan. Resources have already been identified to assist in creating the Resiliency and Recovery Plan and RiverCOG is in discussions with the state on repurposing a potential funding source.

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Move forward with next stage of Plan development	Regional	Medium

Encouraging sustainable & resilient communities



### 3.5 Partner across the region and with regional workforce development agencies to provide training opportunities that match workforce needs **PRIORITY!**

#### Rationale

During the engagement process with business, it became clear that the scale of many local businesses was not large enough to support their own workforce development programs aside from on-the-job training. There are already regional resources to support workforce development. The region needs to actively engage with the workforce partners and industry leaders to see what types of career awareness and “talent pipeline” activities can be created.

#### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Identify industries that would benefit from workforce development assistance	Local; Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Short
Identify existing workforce development programs that could benefit the region and form partnerships as appropriate	Local; Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Long



## 3.6 Support the region's agricultural industry in diversifying operations to other endeavors compatible with agricultural use

### Rationale

The Lower Connecticut River Valley region has an active, important agricultural sector. There is an interest among the agricultural industry as well as from the entrepreneurial community to further development the agricultural and food product sector. However, community level regulations vary and may not be compatible with helping to diversify the revenue streams coming into the local farms to help maintain their viability.

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Work with the Regional Agriculture Council to determine interest in expanding and diversifying operations and understand the current impediments.	Local; Regional	Short
Identify municipal regulations that could be reconfigured to better support the region's agricultural community	Local; Regional	Medium
Provide tools and templates for revising regulations and promoting opportunities	Local; Regional	Long
Develop a program of technical training and assistance for the region's agricultural community to enable greater operational efficiency and business promotion.	Local; Regional; Public/Private	Long

Encouraging sustainable & resilient communities



## 3.7 Develop a zoning template for supporting hybrid businesses that may consist of several different uses under one roof typically found in “maker” consumer product-oriented businesses **PRIORITY!**

### Rationale

The Lower Connecticut River Valley has an emerging maker culture that can be an important driver of success for its business districts. However, many of these businesses are hybrids that mix manufacturing, direct selling and order fulfillment under one roof. Zoning practices need to be aligned where appropriate to support these types of businesses.

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Compile a database of best practices research for hybrid business or “maker district” models that can inform the region’s zoning practice	Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Short
Create a zoning template for supporting hybrid businesses and provide supporting research for the region’s municipalities to incorporate into their regulations	Local; Regional	Medium

# 4 Enhancing high quality of life options for all residents





Enhancing quality of life for all residents



## 4.1 Create a diverse range of housing options at price points that are reflective of wages paid to workers in the region’s jobs

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Implement the recommendations in the <a href="#">Regional Housing Plan</a>	Local; Regional; Private/Non-Profit	Long

Enhancing quality of life for all residents



## 4.2 Promote mixed-use, walkable, vibrant communities in the region's town centers that are attractive to young professionals, families and retirees

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Using the RPOCD as a guide, work with municipalities to identify appropriate locations for these town centers across the region.	Local	Short
Examine municipal plans and zoning regulations to determine whether they support a mixture of uses and pedestrian scale development.	Local	Short
Provide tools and resources to municipalities, including template regulations, sample plans, and renderings, that can be used to improve development outcomes in town centers	Local	Long

Enhancing quality of life for all residents



## 4.3 Encourage continued investment and improvements to the region’s parks, trails and public outdoor amenities

### Implementation

Metrics and Milestones	Partners	Timeframe
Work with municipalities, NGOs, and land trusts to identify priority parks, trails, and outdoor amenities for investment and improvement	Local; Regional; State; Private/Non-Profit	Short
Conduct public engagement to determine what additional amenities would be most beneficial to priority areas.	Local; Private/Non-Profit	Medium



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