

Lower Connecticut River Valley Plan of Conservation and Development 2021-2031 Executive Summary



Overview

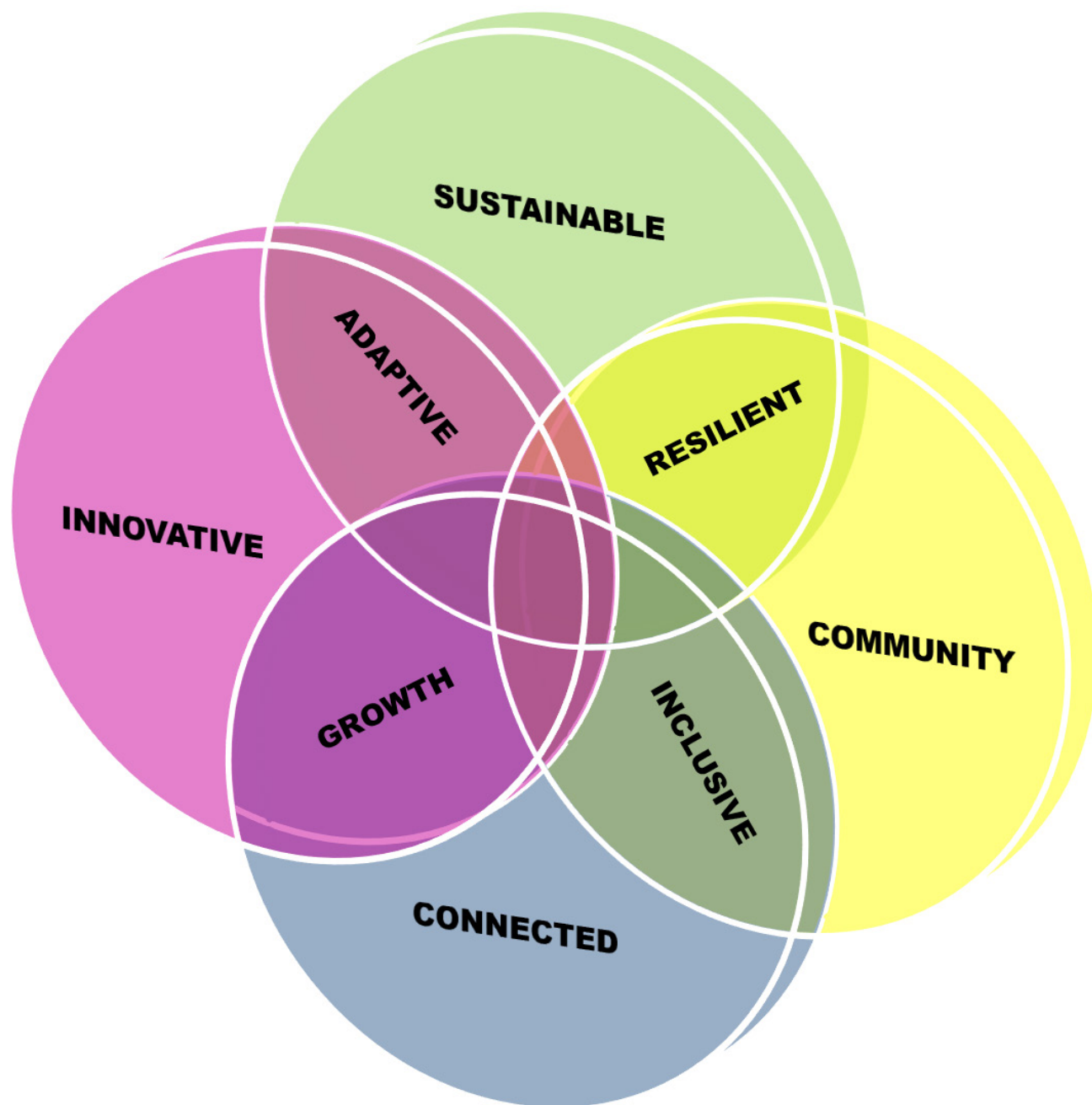
The Lower Connecticut River Valley (LCRV) Region is shaped by its abundance of natural, cultural, recreational, and built resources. Natural amenities, such as the Connecticut River, beaches, forests, protected open spaces, and trail systems contribute extensively to the character of the Region. The built environment is diverse, including rural, agricultural, suburban, and urban settings, anchored by Middletown, the Region's only city. The Regional economy is supported by a variety of activity centers that range from vibrant historic centers to modern shopping centers and strong manufacturing centers. The Region is also home to several tourist destinations, including the Essex Steam Train, Gillette Castle, the Goodspeed Opera House, Brownstone Exploration & Discovery Park, and Powder Ridge Mountain and Ski Resort.

However, despite its many attributes, the Region is facing an aging population, shrinking workforce, wavering economy, and housing stock that does not meet current and future needs. This Regional Plan of Conservation and Development (RPOCD) provides an opportunity to confront these challenges while preserving, promoting, and building upon the Region's many resources for the enjoyment of future generations. It is the hope that this plan will result in a stronger Region that supports high quality of life for all.



Regional Plan Framework

Through the course of public engagement, four key themes emerged as a useful organization tool for the values, concerns, and ideas of the Region: Sustainable, Connected, Innovative, and Community. The RPOCD is centered around these themes which together form the regional vision. Organizing the RPOCD by theme, rather than by traditional planning categories, has been instrumental in showing the interrelatedness of planning issues and solutions while connecting them more concretely to the future vision for the Region.



Summary of Themes

Sustainable

In urban planning sustainability is defined as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Environmentalism is a significant aspect of sustainability, yet, embedded in sustainability are also concerns for social equity and economic development and resilience. These three pillars, environment, equity, and economy, create the foundation of sustainability.

Environmental sustainability looks to ensure that the Region's natural resources are preserved and regenerated to support the needs of future generations. Social equity focuses on valuing people in our community equally and providing for human needs. Economic sustainability involves developing and maintaining practices that support long-term economic growth for both current and future generations. Sustainable communities typically support not only environmental preservation, but compact growth patterns, efficient use of land, multimodal travel choice, and a mixture of housing types to meet the needs of a diverse population.

Current Conditions and Trends

In terms of natural environment, the Region is rich in natural resources, including forests, wetlands, and water bodies, which cover much of the Region. There is strong local stewardship of these resources, however, they are at risk from invasive species, climate change, and sea level rise. The rural suburban nature of our region, makes the region more dependent on fossil fuels, exposing the region more to spikes in energy prices and adding to greenhouse gas emissions.

In terms of social equity, the Region's population is less diverse in race, age, and socio-economic status than other parts of the state. This is result of the high cost of living, lack of variety of housing types, and limited access to alternative modes of transportation which create inadequate access to the Region for people of diverse backgrounds.

Lastly, in terms of economic sustainability, the Region boasts several strong industries, but is limited in sewer, water, and broadband infrastructure to support these industries or create new industries. The Region's highly skilled workforce is aging, and the Region is not attracting a sufficient number of young workers to replace them. These young workers are essential to supporting a sustainable economy, as well as the Region's volunteer emergency and public services. Nevertheless, the Region's communities are strong and resilient, as seen most notably during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Because sustainability underlies

the entirety of this plan, additional factors related to social equity and economic sustainability are incorporated under the other three themes.

Regional Vision and Goals

The VISION:

Sustainability is paramount to the plan and is woven throughout the four themes. The Region's residents, stakeholders, and leaders value the landscape that we have inherited and place significant value in stewardship of the land and its communities that call this place home. As such, the Region will grow and develop in balance with its natural, economic, and social resources. The Region's sustainable policies, practices, infrastructure, and development will make it resilient to environmental and economic threats and will provide the stability necessary to support social equity across the Region. Sustainability also extends to the Region's residents and the need for their adaptability and resilience given environmental, economic, and social changes underway.

The goals and recommendations in the plan are aimed at bridging the gap between the Region's current conditions and future vision. The following goals will support the Region in becoming more sustainable. Additional goals related to social equity and economic sustainability are also incorporated under the other three themes.

- **Goal 1:** Continue to protect air, water, and land in the Region.
- **Goal 2:** Improve water quality and protect water supply.
- **Goal 3:** Prepare for potential impacts of climate change.
- **Goal 4:** Preserve farmland and agriculture
- **Goal 5:** Support transportation and mobility systems and land use development that contribute to environmental and human sustainability while minimizing adverse environmental impacts.
- **Goal 6:** Take measures necessary to support a sustainable and resilient economy.
- **Goal 7:** Ensure diverse and balanced neighborhoods and communities with housing available for households of all income levels.
- **Goal 8:** Balance growth with natural resource protection.

Sustainable Map

While the theme of Sustainable refers to environment, equity, and economy, the Sustainable map is focused specifically on environmental sustainability. The visual aspects of equity and economy overlap with, and are addressed by, the other three themes. The Sustainable map represents a composite of areas that are important to the environmental sustainability of the region. It demonstrates areas that have a high correlation of features such as Primary and Connecting Regional Wildlife Habitat and Natural Resource Protection Corridors, Protected Open Space, Public Water Supply Watersheds and Flood Zones. The designation of these areas is also influenced by the land use classes described on the following pages (Innovative and Community). The identification of these areas as Sustainable does not preclude land use or policies within these areas that would be considered Innovative or Community based, rather it recommends that Sustainable land uses and policies be a high priority for these areas to ensure the protection and preservation of natural resources for future generations.



Connected

Active modes of transportation, such as walking and biking, can promote physical health, support mental and emotional wellbeing, and engender a greater sense of connection to the community. Ensuring that transit, walking, and biking are viable alternatives to vehicle trips can promote equitable access to the region's services, amenities, and employment opportunities, for people of all ages, income levels, and abilities. Further, creating multiple viable modes of transportation in the region can reduce reliance on single occupancy vehicle trips. This can improve overall environmental health by reducing pollutant emissions and limiting vehicle infrastructure, such as roads and parking, that contribute to stormwater runoff and heat island effect.

Increased wireless and wired broadband service is necessary to promote economic competitiveness and provides remote work opportunities. This can enhance the Region's attractiveness to those who have the ability to work from anywhere.

Current Conditions and Trends

In terms of physical connection, the Region benefits from its central location, which is easily accessible by several major highways. However, because of the relative ease of highway access and the region's overall pattern of low-density, suburban development, there has been significant reliance on highway travel and single occupancy vehicle trips. This reliance is compounded by the relative lack of reliable and comprehensive infrastructure for alternative modes of transportation. Although the region is served by bus and train, current lack of frequency, coordination, and coverage of routes make these transit options more difficult to use and not attractive to those who have access to motor vehicles. Further, while biking and hiking routes and trails are prevalent throughout the region, they are principally used for recreational purposes. Bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure remain insufficient to support safe daily trips for the average people. Internal connections between towns in the Region are also complicated by the Connecticut River, which transects the Region and can only be crossed at three locations.

In addition to physical connection, technological connection has become increasingly essential to modern life. Densely developed areas in the Region tend to be more reliably connected by wireless and wired broadband services than more remote areas. Due to limited infrastructure and providers, and/or topographic impediments, much of the region has been left with unreliable or insufficient Internet access.

Regional Vision and Goals

The VISION:

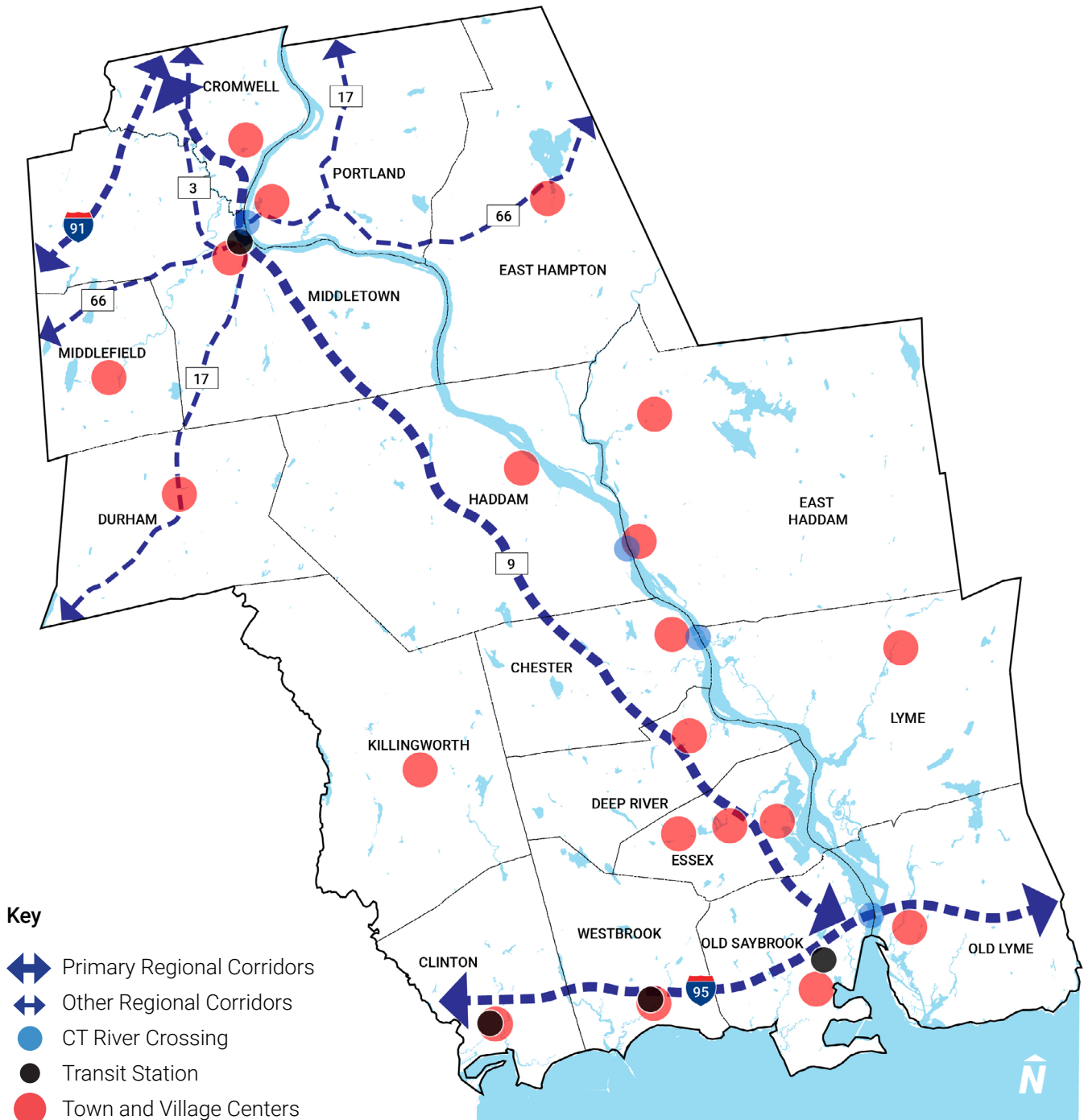
The Region will be a well-connected place with strong internal and external connections. Those connections will take all forms: social, cultural, physical, environmental, and digital. Municipalities will have strong connections within their communities and with surrounding towns. The Region will become better connected to surrounding regions and metropolitan centers via multi-modal transportation infrastructure and enhanced communications technology, as well as open space and greenways, and the social and cultural connections that such infrastructure facilitates. The Region will be intentional in its efforts to become a better-connected place, accessible by all modes of travel and for all types of people. It will be an attractive place to live, work, learn, and play because of the ease of access that all residents, workers, and visitors enjoy.

The goals and recommendations in the plan are aimed at bridging the gap between the Region's current conditions and future vision. The following goals will support the Region in becoming a well-connected place for all people.

- **Goal 1:** Expand pedestrian transportation options.
- **Goal 2:** Expand bicycle transportation options.
- **Goal 3:** Expand transit serving the Region.
- **Goal 4:** Expand access to high-speed Internet.
- **Goal 5:** Adequately maintain transportation infrastructure and services.
- **Goal 6:** Proactively manage Regional traffic issues.
- **Goal 7:** Anticipate and plan for future transportation needs.
- **Goal 8:** Improve connections and expand access to open space resources.

Connected Map

While the theme of Connected refers to social, cultural, physical, environmental, and digital connections, the Connected map reflects the vision for physical transportation connections in the Region. The Connected map represents the nodes and corridors that are most valuable to the Region's micro- and macro- connectivity. The nodes around transit stations and town and village centers indicate areas that would benefit most from greater micro-connectivity, such as pedestrian and bicycle orientation. This would support more active transportation to meet daily needs. The large corridors indicate connections between major residential and employment destinations which would benefit from greater macro-connectivity, such as enhanced reliability and frequency of public transportation and comprehensive bicycle and pedestrian routes. This would allow alternatives for commuting and offer greater flexibility for tourists visiting the region.



Innovative

Typical business districts take the form of isolated corporate campuses or science parks that are only accessible by car. By contrast, innovation districts, or hubs, contain a mixture of research-oriented anchor institutions, supporting businesses, and creative start-ups in an amenity rich environment that is integrated into the surrounding community. Innovation districts foster an environment that generates new ideas, grows jobs, and bolsters the regional economy. In addition, innovation districts are attractive to young talented workers because they offer quality employment in vibrant neighborhoods with choices in housing, transportation, and amenities.

Current Conditions and Trends

The Region is home to several major industries and institutions that lend themselves to collaboration and innovation, including healthcare, manufacturing, and bioscience. However, only a small portion of the region is zoned for industrial or commercial use. Furthermore, existing industrial and commercial zones are not necessarily located near important anchor institutions and seldom offer the level of flexibility necessary to generate innovation hubs. Limited public utilities and broadband access further hinder the ability for innovative industry to flourish in the Region.

While the Region possesses a highly educated and highly skilled workforce, the workforce is rapidly aging. The Region has not been able to retain or attract young residents to spur new and innovative industries and has not created strong programs to facilitate innovative business and foster partnership among institutions.

Regional Vision and Goals

The VISION:

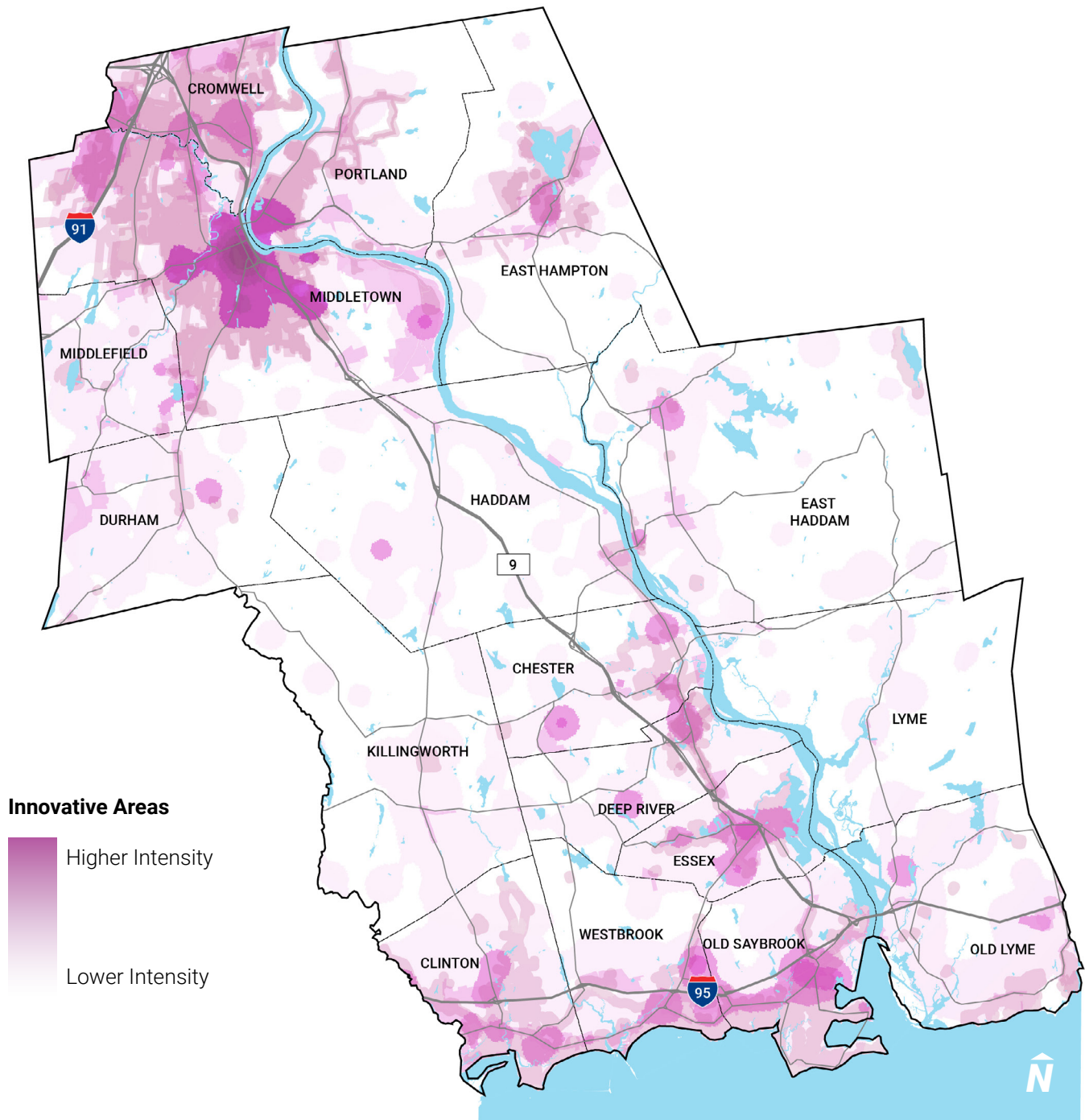
The Region has a long history of innovation that will continue to be central to its identity well into the future. Innovation in the Region has taken many forms over time beginning with a rich industrial history which emerged from mills along the Connecticut River and its tributaries, to industries that thrived from the Region's transportation connections whether water, rail, or highway. Innovation is diverse across the Region, which is home to advanced manufacturing, technology, aerospace, bioscience, arts, and education. The Lower Connecticut River Valley will foster an environment of growth and opportunity that supports, encourages, and attracts innovation. Additionally, the Region will provide a high-quality of life that is attractive to a highly skilled workforce.

The goals and recommendations in the plan are aimed at bridging the gap between the Region's current conditions and future vision. The following goals will support the Region in becoming a destination for innovative business.

- **Goal 1:** Establish the Region as a unique enclave that provides a high quality of life combined with an environment that is supportive of innovation.
- **Goal 2:** Establish one or more "Innovation Districts" in the Region, where appropriate.
- **Goal 3:** Support the development of environments that foster innovation.
- **Goal 4:** Provide the Region's businesses and start-ups with good access to capital.
- **Goal 5:** Promote State and/or Federal funding to support innovation.

Innovative Map

The Innovative map demonstrates areas that have a high concentration of job locations, areas with supportive infrastructure, and areas zoned to allow for commercial, industrial, institutional, and mixed-use land uses. The identification of these areas as Innovative does not preclude land use and policies within these areas that would be considered Sustainable or Community based, rather it recommends that land uses and policies that support innovation be a priority for these areas. Innovative places and development can take a number of forms and differs from community to community. By example, the scale of a land use that supports innovation in downtown Middletown would differ vastly from an innovative enterprise or land use in Lyme.



Community

Diversity creates more vibrant communities. Access to housing choice, multi-modal transportation, and key services, can greatly enhance diversity by improving access for people of different age, ability, and socio-economic status. These factors also improve quality of life by encouraging social interaction and participation in community activities. In addition, communities that encourage walking and biking in a compact, pedestrian scale, environment provide more opportunities for residents to interact and engender stronger community connection.

Current Conditions and Trends

The Region is made of up small villages and towns as well as one large city, with each having its own unique character and strong sense of community. Several of these communities have a historic pedestrian-oriented center with a vibrant mixture of uses. These centers often play host to events and activities that strengthen the community bond. However, the Region generally follows a more recent suburban pattern of development. Low density, single-family housing is dominant and is substantially separated from most business or industrial uses. In-town pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure and multi-modal transportation between towns is limited, necessitating a vehicle for most trips. Housing costs in the Region are high and options for smaller housing units or rentals are limited most everywhere but the city of Middletown. In addition, the Region's population is stagnating and there is limited diversity in terms of race, age, and socio-economic status outside of Middletown. These existing conditions are the result of past practices which at times were deliberately intended to cause substantial racial and socio-economic separation in the Region. This legacy must be addressed in creating more vibrant and sustainable communities.

Regional Vision and Goals

The VISION:

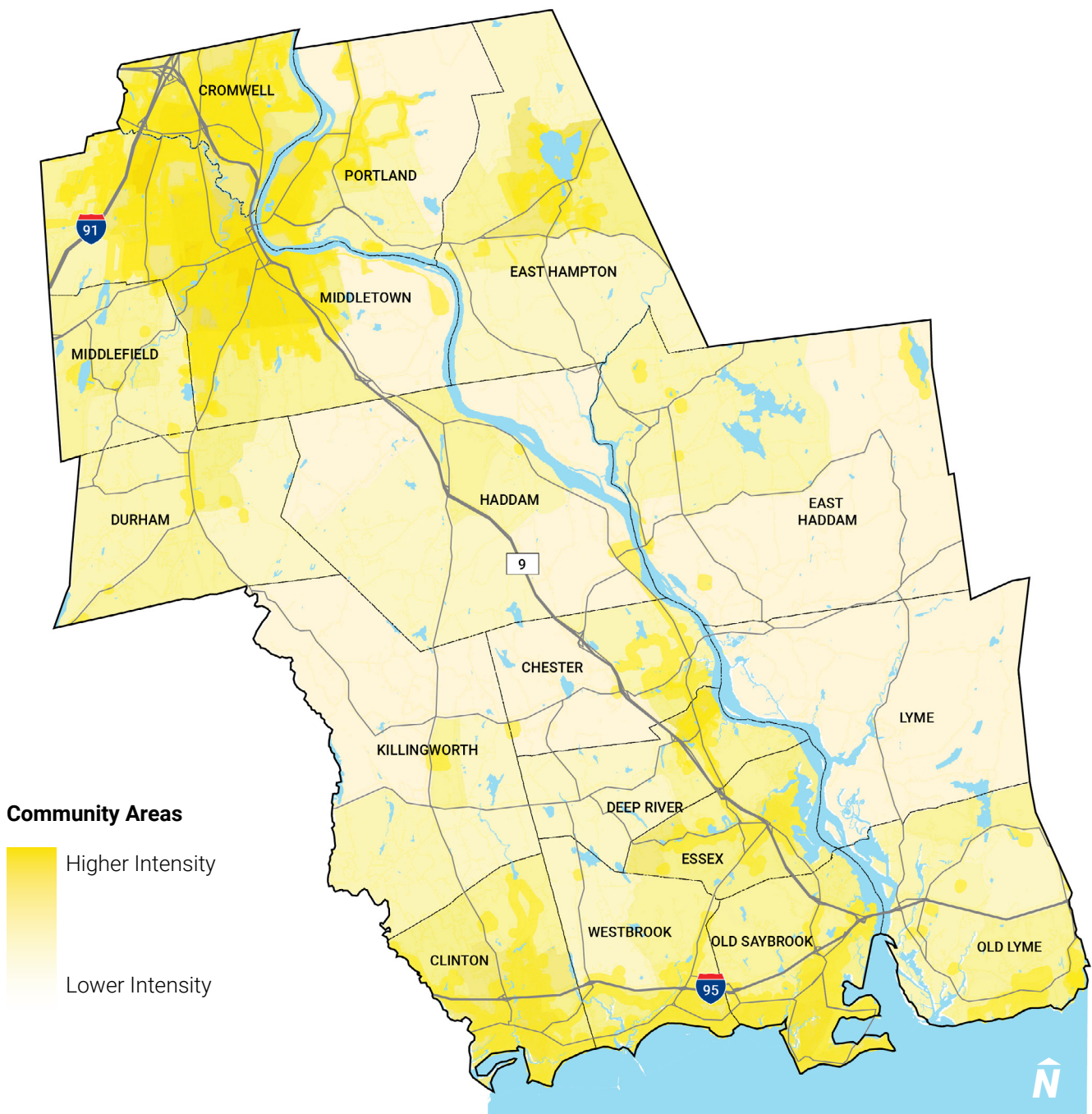
The Lower Connecticut River Valley is a welcoming and inclusive place. Communities are formed in neighborhoods, villages, and town centers, and also across town and city boundaries. These communities are situated across the Region's landscape including along the Connecticut River, the hills that define the river valley, and the Long Island Sound shoreline. The Region's communities are formed by and connected through social bonds established in its schools, workplaces, cultural institutions, social spaces, and neighborhoods. The Region is home to diverse communities that reflect the many cultures, ethnicities, and traditions of its peoples. These communities are inextricably linked, and it is this foundation of community that gives the Region its strength.

The goals and recommendations in the plan are aimed at bridging the gap between the Region's current conditions and future vision. The following goals will support the Region in and enhancing and creating more vibrant communities.

- **Goal 1:** Foster an environment of cultural exchange.
- **Goal 2:** Create vibrant, equitable communities within established city, town, and village centers and in proximity of Shore Line East stations.
- **Goal 3:** Diversify housing stock to attract younger residents and retain seniors and provide more housing that is affordable to residents of all income levels.
- **Goal 4:** Improve access to housing and remove or reduce barriers to homeownership.
- **Goal 5:** Improve connectivity between and within neighborhoods, rural areas, and village and town centers.
- **Goal 6:** Strengthen the role of the Region's major institutions in the community.
- **Goal 7:** Foster an environment that is supportive of collaboration and partnerships.
- **Goal 8:** Support the Region's farm communities.
- **Goal 9:** Support the protection of the Region's historic villages and town centers and promote those places as tourist attractions.

Community Map

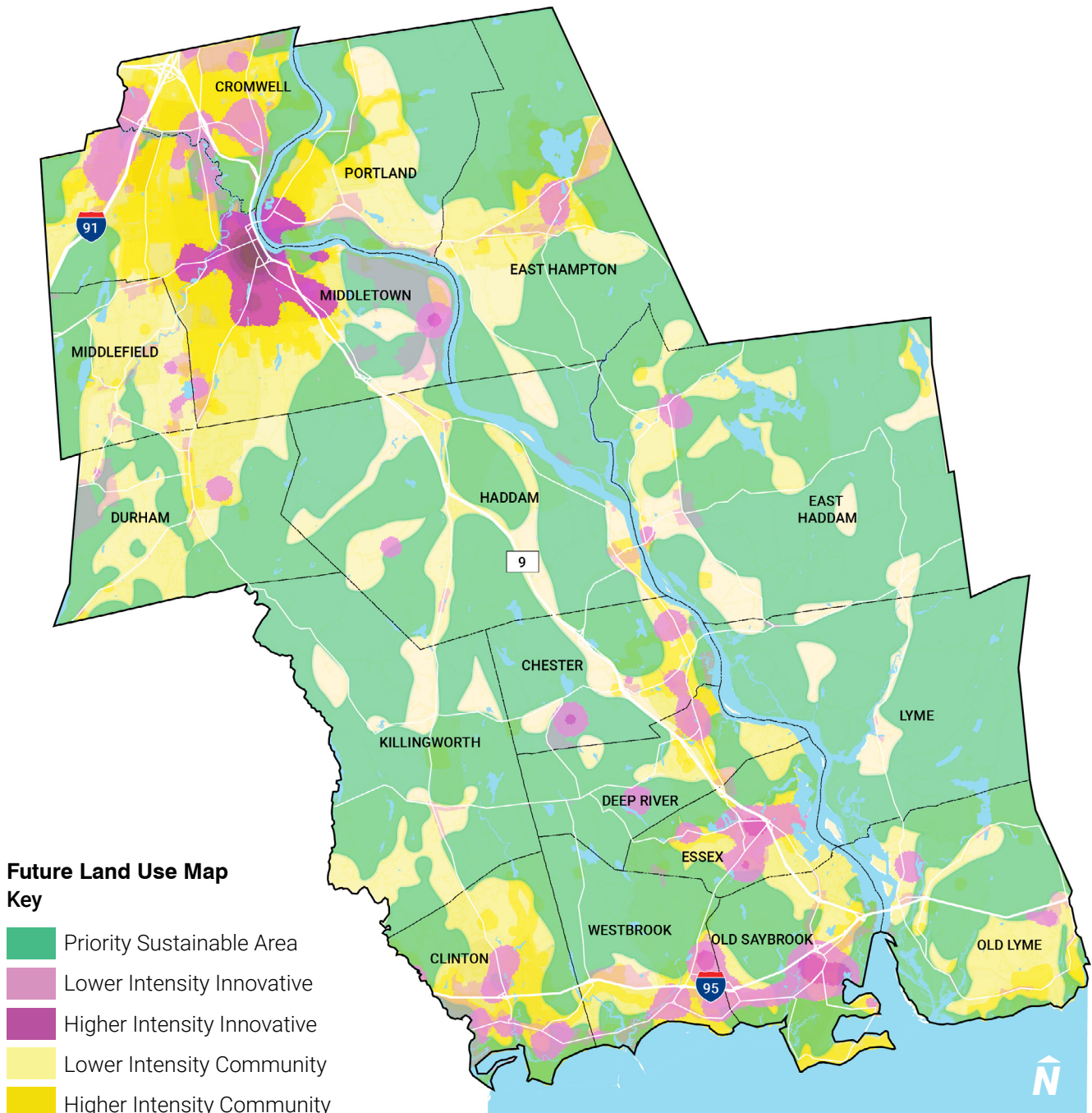
The Region is comprised of many communities at neighborhood, municipal, district, institutional, and cultural scales. Community is present throughout the Region and it is the fabric of the Region. For the purposes of the Future Land Use map, Community is correlated most strongly with where people live and where they live in the greatest concentrations. The Community map represents a composite of areas that are most strongly correlated with the Community land use. The identification of these areas as Community does not preclude land use and policies within these areas that would be considered Sustainable or Innovative, rather it recommends that land uses and policies that support Community be a priority for these areas. Future development oriented towards improving and expanding communities will differ significantly from one community to another within the Region based upon the character of that community and the infrastructure in place to support such development.

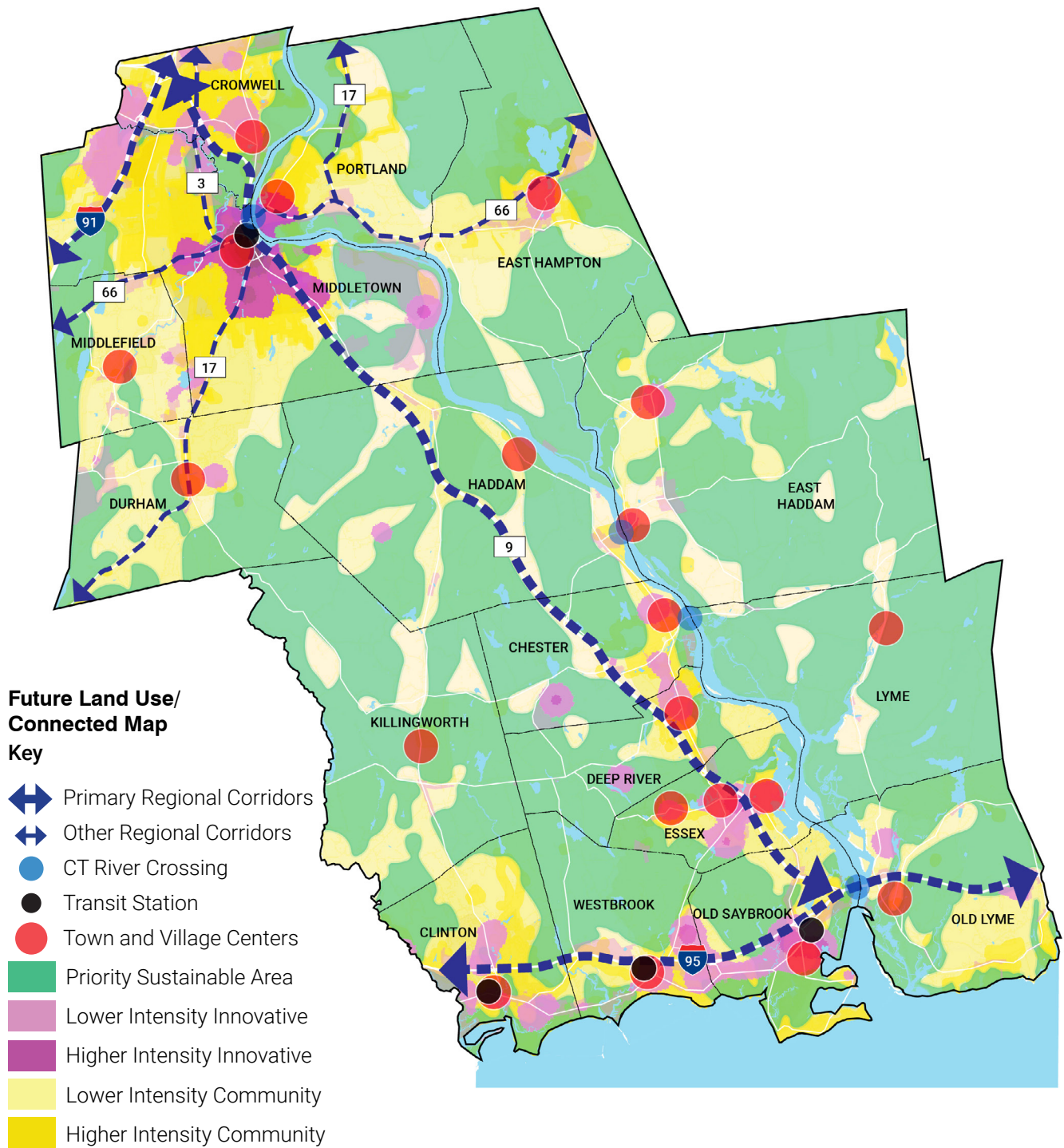


The Future of the Region

This plan is consistent with the state's growth management principles in that it promotes physical and economic development in areas of existing activity. The plan envisions the region as home to several activity centers where future development can be targeted. These centers are envisioned as vibrant destinations where civic, residential, commercial, and employment uses can be integrated. In order to emphasize the unique attributes of the various towns in the Region, each center will be context sensitive in scale and character to the town where it is located. All centers will be pedestrian and bicycle friendly, characterized by attractive streets and public spaces, and will incorporate a variety of housing types affordable for people with different incomes and needs. Over time, these centers will be linked by a multi-modal transit system, connecting where people live with where they work, shop, learn and recreate.

Focusing growth on existing activity centers utilizes existing infrastructure and supports economies of scale. It also preserves the greatest amount of open space. This strategy recognizes the importance of both the built and the natural environment to the Region's overall identity and reinforces the vitality and sustainability of each.





The Future Land Use map is intended to link this Plan, its themes, vision, goals, and recommendations with the geography of the Region. This map builds upon, but does not replace, the future land use maps and plans of individual municipalities. Instead, it provides a unified vision for the Region that can assist in guiding investment, development, and conservation across the Region, transcending municipal boundaries. The map serves only as a guide for priorities across the Region, it does not prohibit or discourage land uses and investment that are not consistent with the theme identified for that geography.

The connected theme overlays the Future Land Use map and threads the Region together. The features displayed in dark blue below represent the Region's vital connections, which include highways, rail corridors, rail stations, bus routes, Connecticut River crossings, and the Connecticut River. This map highlights major corridors that are, and will continue to be, vital to the Region with respect to mobility. The Region is comprised of many other corridors and roadways that are valuable to local connectivity that are not expressed on this map. This map does not preclude connectivity related improvements to, or investment in, areas not shown on the map. The map is intended to identify the corridors that are a priority for policies and investment related to connectivity and mobility across the Region.

Implementation

Implementing the recommendations of this Plan requires a full engagement of the resources within the LCRV Region. RiverCOG, as the Region's Council of Governments, will act as a coordinator, resource, and driver of many of this plan's recommendations. The success of this plan, however, will require the participation of its member communities and their governing bodies, departments, boards, commissions, and committees. Additionally, partnerships are needed with private organizations including major institutions, not-for profit organizations, businesses, and advocacy groups and organizations. Likewise, collaboration with State agencies and other regional entities will be required throughout the implementation process. The plan contains summary tables of the goals and recommendations under each theme. For each, the table lists the urgency level, lead agency that should take responsibility for the action, and the level of collaboration potential.

While the RPOCD can provide a blueprint for this Regional vision, it is incumbent upon every municipality to invest in its success as we plan for the years ahead. It is the hope of RiverCOG that each municipality in the Region partners with us over the coming decade as we work to make this vision a reality.

