



Rhode Island of 2025 will be a unique and special place, retaining its distinctive landscape, history, traditions, and natural beauty, while growing to meet its residents' needs for a thriving economy and vibrant places to live.



## Rhode Island State Land Use Policies and Plan



## Rhode Island State Land Use Policies and Plan—Executive Summary

*Land Use 2025 State Land Use Policies and Plan* is Rhode Island's plan for conservation and development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This plan challenges Rhode Islanders to work collectively to design, build, and conserve the state's communities and landscapes to insure that they are of a caliber Rhode Island deserves.

*Land Use 2025* is the major State Guide Plan in Rhode Island's planning and development system. The plan articulates the state's overarching goals, objectives, and strategies to guide and coordinate the land-use plans and regulations of municipalities and state agencies and to direct good strategic projects at both state and municipal levels.

Much of *Land Use 2025* including the quotations highlighting this executive summary, flows from the opinions of the general public, state leadership, and planning professionals on land-use trends, community values, and growth priorities. Statewide Planning began to gather this information in 2000 through several major efforts: a public opinion survey, a televised "Town Meeting," and a series of regional meetings with local planning officials. In 2003, several dozen Rhode Island planning practitioners participated in interviews and a day-long brainstorming session that produced the organizing framework for this plan: greenways, community design, and infrastructure.

The Rhode Island Department of Administration's Division of Planning is the central planning agency for state government. The work of the program is guided by the State Planning Council, composed of state, local, and public representatives and federal and other advisors. Activities of the program are supported by state appropriations and federal grants. This publication is based upon publicly supported research and may not be copyrighted. It may be reprinted, in part or full, with the customary crediting of the source. Additional funding for printing this document was provided by Rhode Island Housing.

This document should be referenced as: Rhode Island Division of Planning. 2006. *Land Use 2025: Rhode Island State Land Use Policies and Plan Executive Summary*. M. Allard Cox (ed.), Rhode Island Sea Grant, Narragansett, R.I. 16 pp.

The full land-use plan is available on-line at [www.planning.ri.gov](http://www.planning.ri.gov). For more information, contact the Division of Planning, One Capitol Hill, Providence, RI 02908. Tel: (401) 222-7901.

Design by Puffin Enterprises

Photos provided by:

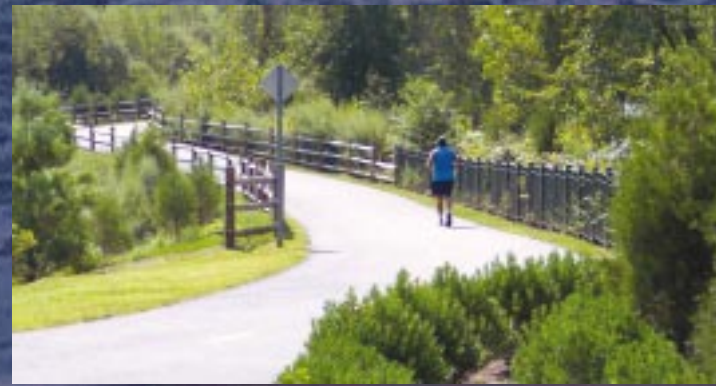
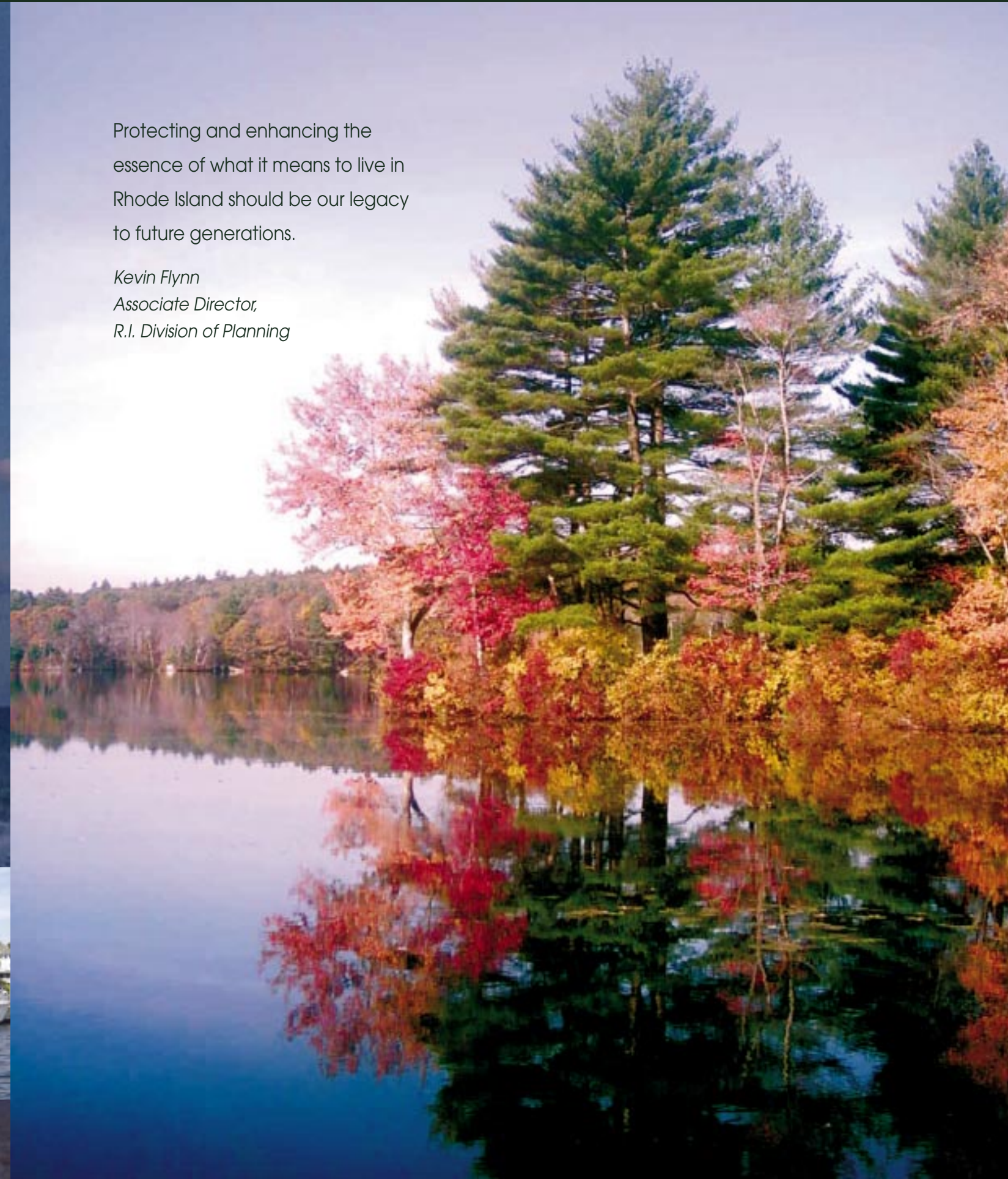
Block Island aerial photo courtesy iStock photography, The Breakers photo courtesy The Preservation Society of Newport County, Cover aerial photo courtesy Providence Water Supply Board, Providence sewage tunnel photo by Gilbane/Jacobs and courtesy The Narragansett Bay Commission. Other photos by Housing Network of Rhode Island, the Pawtucket Red Sox, Puffin Enterprises, the R.I. Department of Environmental Management, the R.I. Department of Transportation, the R.I. Division of Planning/Statewide Planning Program, Rhode Island Sea Grant, Rhode Island Tourism Division, Sakonnet Vineyards, Save The Bay, and the planning departments of East Providence, Narragansett, Newport, Providence, Warwick, and Woonsocket.

### Postcards

Cover: Suburban Home, W.R. White  
Page 10: Narragansett Pier, Souvenir Post Card Co.  
Page 12: Crescent Park, A.C. Bosselman & Co.  
Page 13: The Breakers, Tichnor Bros. Inc.; Phenix Mill, Blanchard, Young & Co.  
Page 15: Newport Windmill, A.C. Bosselman & Co.  
Page 16: Westerly, The Rhode Island News Co.  
Back cover: Providence, C.T. American Art

Protecting and enhancing the essence of what it means to live in Rhode Island should be our legacy to future generations.

Kevin Flynn  
Associate Director,  
R.I. Division of Planning



# Land Use 2025

Rhode Island  
State Land Use  
Policies and Plan

Executive Summary

*“Investing in urban areas and trying to direct development to those village centers would help to preserve the quality of life and slow down growth in some of the more rural areas.”*



The background of the document is a photograph of the Rhode Island State House dome, featuring a statue of a figure holding a torch on top. The dome is white with a green roof and is set against a blue sky with light clouds. The building's facade is visible on either side of the dome.

## State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations

State House  
Providence, Rhode Island 02903-1196  
401-222-2080

Donald L. Carcieri  
*Governor*

My Fellow Rhode Islanders:

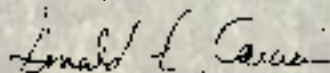
As a lifelong Rhode Islander, I have a deep appreciation for our state's natural heritage. From our beautiful beaches to our scenic parks, from our many historic sites to our farms and green open spaces, Rhode Island has a quality of life that is truly second to none. It is imperative that we work together to preserve our state's natural resources for future generations to enjoy.

That's why the State's Planning Council has adopted a comprehensive plan to better address statewide land-use planning throughout Rhode Island. Land Use 2025 is an important new State Guide Plan for conservation and development in Rhode Island for the next 20 years.

Managing land use is a complex issue that involves federal, state, and municipal regulations. It is crucial for elected officials and for all Rhode Islanders to take the necessary measures to ensure that the pattern of growth in our state does not diminish our quality of life. Land Use 2025 will serve as a blueprint for proper land development and enable us to meet the challenges before us.

I hope that you will find this plan to be a useful resource as we continue our ongoing efforts to grow smart.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Donald L. Carcieri". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "D".

Donald L. Carcieri  
Governor

# Land Use in Rhode Island: An Introduction



Warwick

As you read this, Rhode Island's future landscape is being shaped. Hundreds of land-use decisions are made every day by individuals and businesses ...

- A couple with a growing family places a down payment on a new and bigger house in a suburban town.
- A global corporation selects a Rhode Island downtown office suite to house its North American sales support operation.
- A chef newly arrived from New York opens a restaurant in an abandoned urban storefront that formerly housed a bakery.
- A farm family reluctantly concludes that it no longer can continue its farm operation and accepts a purchase offer from a real estate developer.
- An elderly widow looking to downsize moves to an assisted-living community.

... as well as by cities and towns:

- To generate taxes, the zoning board of a rural community votes to rezone forestland adjoining a highway exit for commercial use.
- The city council of a major city endorses a sweeping waterfront redevelopment plan.
- A state development agency provides a grant for a municipality to extend

water lines to a new industrial park on the edge of town.

- The planning board of a suburban community adopts a comprehensive plan amendment encouraging multi-family housing within certain commercial districts.

What do these decisions mean for the future?

- Will you be able to walk to a drug-store, library, or school?
- How large will your yard be?
- How high will your property taxes be?
- Will your children be able to live and work in Rhode Island?
- How much park, forest, or farmland will your community have?
- Will it take you 10, 20, or 30 minutes to drive to the grocery store?
- Will your commute to work take 15, 30, or 60 minutes, or more?

Land use is about how we arrange our communities to meet our needs. Land-use policies will dictate much about how we and our children will live. We must be deliberate in deciding how best to use our land, a limited and precious resource in Rhode Island.



## What would you do with 350,000 acres?

That's the number of acres Rhode Island has available for development. If development follows recent trends, 110,000 of those acres could be consumed by residential, industrial, commercial, and other developmental needs through 2025. Through careful management, however, we could use less than half that land over the next 20 years, while protecting the state's unique character, conserving its natural resources, expanding its economy, and saving its taxpayers money.



# Where are we heading?

## Land-use trends 1970-1995

Compact and intimate traditional settlements and distinct farm and forest patterns give Rhode Island a unique identity with a strong distinction between historic urban centers and more rural surrounding areas.

Rhode Island's population and housing densities are among the highest in the country, yet our state also ranks high in percentage of forested land—nearly 60 percent—because 75 percent of the population resides in a 40-mile-long urban/suburban corridor along the shores of Narragansett Bay and in the valleys of the Blackstone and Pawtuxet rivers. This corridor contains nearly all of the public infrastructure, major transportation routes, and institutional and cultural centers.

Much of this corridor was developed prior to the 1970s. Recent decades have brought some dramatic changes. R.I. Division of Planning's most recent profile of statewide land use, *Land Use Trends 1970-1995*, found that in those 25 years, Rhode Island developed its land at a rate much higher than historic trends. It took over 300 years to develop the first 20 percent of the state's land, and only 25 more years to develop another 9 percent. Development increased nearly nine times faster than the population grew, as people and businesses moved to the rural and suburban parts of the state, creating sprawl and increasing demand for new or improved roads. The state's suburban communities gained 56,000 jobs, while the cities lost 10,000 jobs.

## Land-use trends since 1995

Recently, development of vacant land and redevelopment projects in the state's urban communities have returned. Rhode Island's aggressive historic tax credit program has driven much of the investment in historic commercial and industrial buildings.

This resurgence has been accompanied by major investments in land conservation. Between 1992 and 2003, state and local bonds provided over \$73 million for Rhode Island's open space system, preserving or protecting nearly 7,000 acres.

Despite these highlights, Rhode Island's land use continues to sprawl. About 30 percent of the land that was undeveloped in 1995 has been built on over the last 10 years. In some of the more rapidly developing communities, building activity has consumed as much as 75 percent of vacant land.

This pattern of low-density, large-lot, single-use, and scattered development unnecessarily consumes vast natural resources and requires redundant taxpayer investments in public facilities and infrastructure. Sprawl fragments areas, detracting from well-functioning centers and neighborhoods. Sprawl also requires that households have transportation to access community facilities and shopping. Sprawl isolates those who are not mobile, particularly children and the elderly, from accessing everything from schools to senior centers. Recent studies have linked sprawl with health problems related to inactivity.

The essential land-use question for Rhode Island is whether to continue to sprawl, or to return to a more efficient mode of land use inspired by traditional models of development that have served the state well for over 300 years.

# The Vision: Where do we want to be in 20 years?

This plan envisions Rhode Island as a constellation of community centers connected by infrastructure corridors and framed by greenspace.

- *Rhode Island of 2025 will be a unique and special place, retaining its distinctive landscape, history, traditions, and natural beauty, while growing to meet its residents' needs for a thriving economy and vibrant places to live.*

- *The state will have contained sprawl, and housing, commerce, and social interaction will be concentrated in dense centers of varying scales, marked by quality design.*

- *Greater Providence will be the region's premier center for people and culture. Other cities, towns, and villages will be lively subcenters, connected by efficient transportation and services networks.*

- *A thinly settled, forested band in the western third of the state will conserve essential resources and support resource-based economies. Farmland and forests will surround centers that are infused with greenways and greenspace. Narragansett Bay will be healthy and productive. The waterfront edge will remain the state's trademark, carefully managed to sustain its uses while preserving its natural qualities.*

- *Rhode Island will balance the needs of its people with the protection of its environmental resources. It will be a place where all generations may enjoy natural beauty, a productive economy, a connection to the past, and a prosperous future.*

# What does the future hold?

## Achieving the vision: An “urban-rural” approach

Today, one can leave downtown Providence and be in the country in 20 minutes. Protecting these two distinctly different development patterns while creating a constellation of centers calls for an “urban-rural” approach.

*Urban approach:* In the urban residential corridor, a strategy that supports more intensive land use should focus on initiatives for preserving or enhancing neighborhoods, traditional villages, and communities, and promoting mass transit, pedestrian environments, affordable housing, compact development, public infrastructure, and urban design.

*Rural approach:* In the more rural areas of the state and along the forested corridors, south shore beaches, salt ponds, and Bay islands, a strategy that accommodates residential and recreational land use while preserving natural resources and open spaces should avoid sprawl and promote clustering development and greenway connections.

## Meeting needs, protecting resources

*Land Use 2025* proposes growth within an urban services boundary and in selected centers in rural and suburban communities to provide growth opportunities throughout the state. This plan would use only 7 percent of the state’s land area to meet growth needs through 2025. It emphasizes new housing at higher densities, but also includes 25 percent of its production in lower-density categories to help ensure a range of housing choices while supporting affordable options. This plan limits impacts on natural resources, especially in the western portion of the state, but requires careful management to avoid increased impacts on the Bay from shoreline development. Greater use of public transit would reduce highway congestion, and other infrastructure will need to be upgraded to increase capacity.



Newport

*“If we focused jobs in the cities, that’s where the focus of transportation, the focus of living would be.”*



Former Ocean State Steel property, East Providence, GeoNova Development Corporation.



Block Island



Bristol



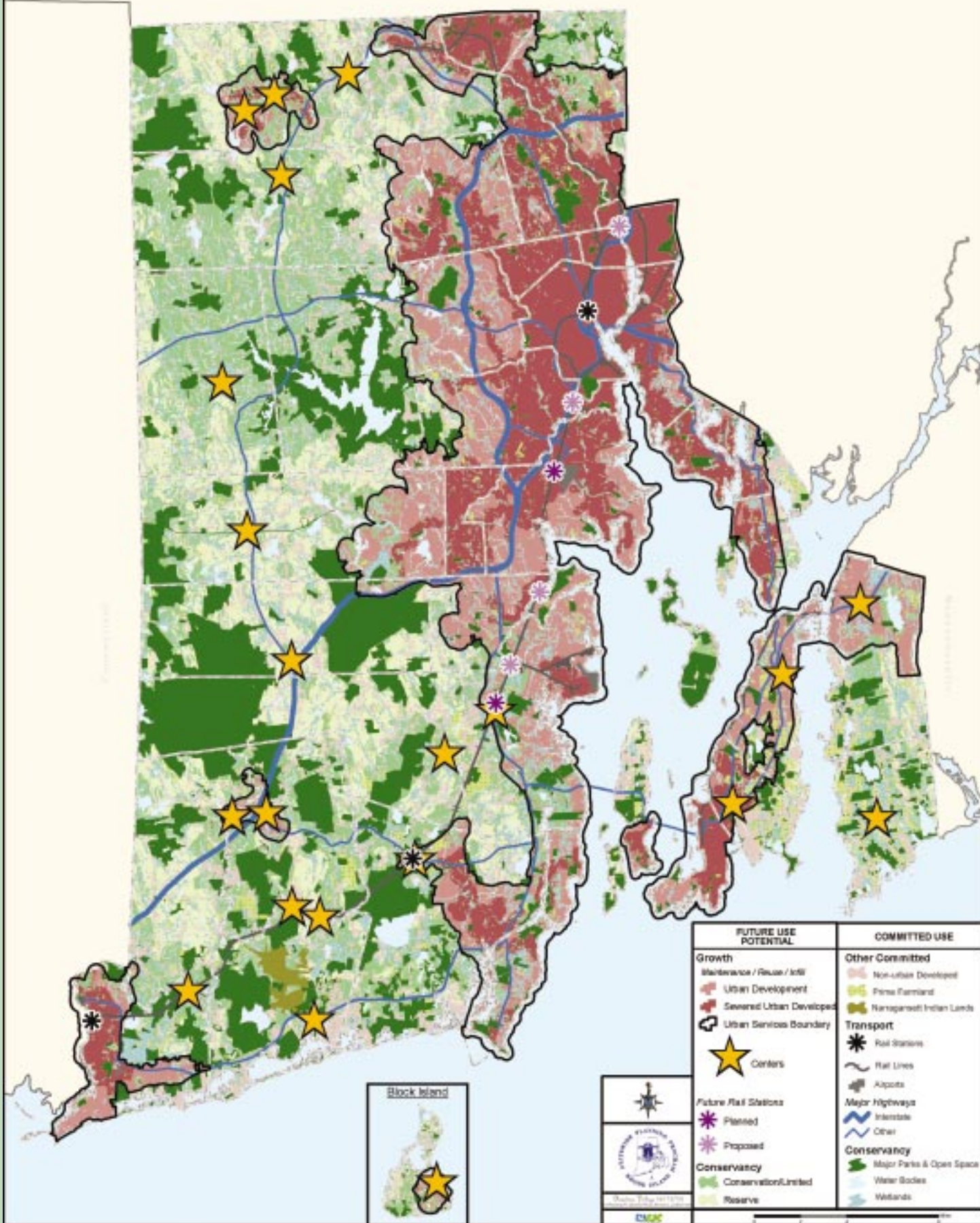
“We must find ways to replicate some of the best examples of our past development patterns—villages and neighborhoods that add to Rhode Island’s charm and distinctiveness—that created places such as Providence’s Smith Hill and Elmwood, historic Bristol and Newport, Woonsocket’s Constitution Hill, and Ashaway Village in Hopkinton.”

## Facing Challenges: Investing in Our Vision

To achieve Land Use 2025, we must anticipate challenging issues related to land use—housing, economic development, natural and cultural resources, services and facilities, open space and recreation, and transportation—and develop strategies to meet them. A state investment policy that supports growth in the urban services core and community centers and provides technical assistance to municipal planners is intended to aid cities and towns in implementing necessary policies.



# Future Land Use 2025



## Future Land Use 2025 Map

The Future Land Use 2025 Map illustrates the desired patterns of Rhode Island's future development and conservation.

### What the map proposes

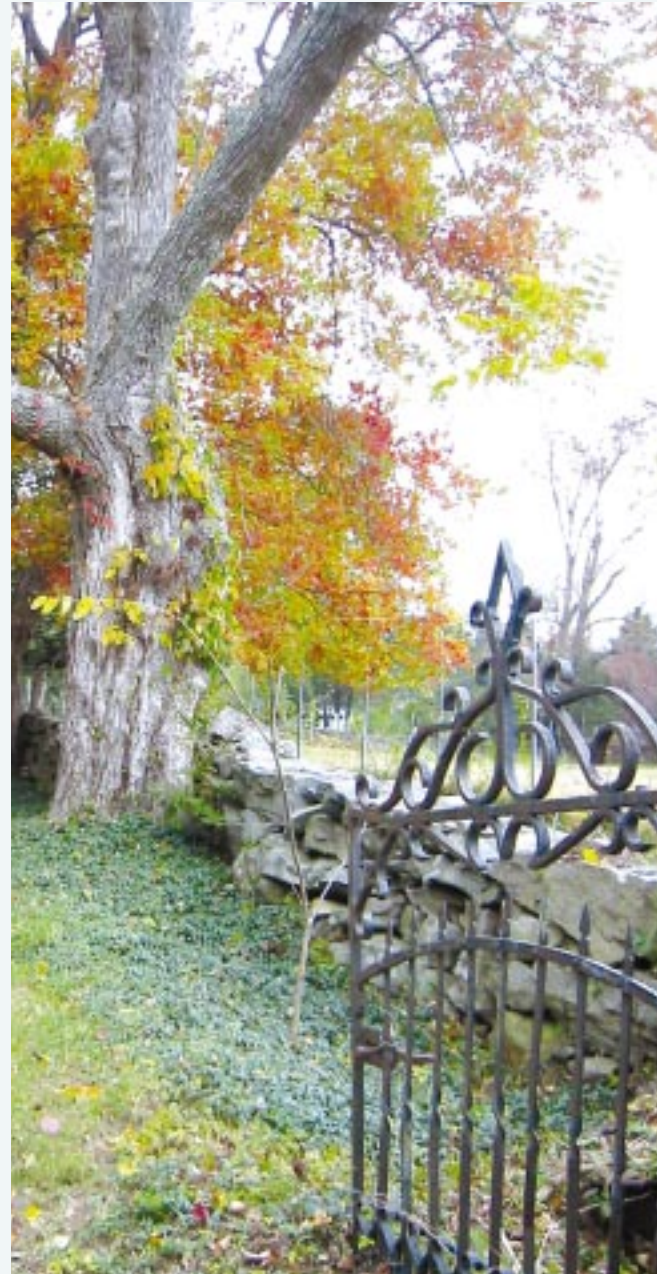
The map proposes retaining the distinction between Rhode Island's urban and rural areas. The areas within the urban services boundary, along with potential centers outside it, are identified as optimum areas for accommodating the bulk of the state's development needs through 2025. They are areas where growth—whether new development or reuse, infill, and redevelopment—should generally be encouraged by state and local policies and investments. Future Use Potential areas also include lands more suited for conservation uses and lands outside the urban services boundary that are not needed to accommodate the state's growth needs. In these categories, it is recommended that growth and development not be encouraged or supported.

### How to interpret the map

The Future Land Use 2025 Map is intended as a guide to municipalities and state agencies in planning, development, and conservation of areas within their jurisdictions. The information on this map is suitable for planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary or regulatory interpretation.

- It is not intended to be used as a basis for specific development proposals.
- The area identified as "Urban Development" is intended to include varying levels of development and will also include areas of protected green space that may not appear on the map.
- The "Centers" depicted are for illustrative purposes and are not intended to designate specific geographic boundaries.

# 2025 Map





# GOALS

The following goals and objectives will help us to achieve Land use 2025. Photos provide examples of places around the state that are already implementing these ideas.

## GOAL 1: BUILD THE GREENSPACE AND GREENWAYS SYSTEM

- Protect critical natural resources
- Improve urban and community green-space
- Provide diverse public outdoor recreation facilities
- Use greenspace to shape urban development patterns
- Protect shoreline areas



*"Many of us remember what it was like to grow up with fields around us and skating ponds and sliding hills."*



Pawtucket



Burlingame Park



# the Greenspace & Greenways System



Charlestown

*"I think we as citizens of Rhode Island are all trustees of a very special place."*



McCoy Stadium



Pawcatuck River



# Goal 2: Achieve

## GOAL 2: ACHIEVE EXCELLENCE IN COMMUNITY DESIGN

- Focus growth in a variety of centers
- Promote traditional neighborhoods
- Preserve special places
- Protect rural character
- Promote diverse, affordable housing
- Develop major employment centers



Crescent Park Carousel, East Providence



Develop major employment centers

Portsmouth



Protect rural character

*"I like the way Bristol values the old and looks to the future."*



# Excellence in Community Design



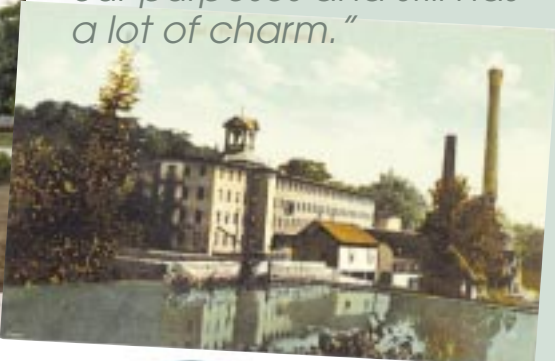
Preserve special places

Save The Bay Center, Fields Point, Providence

"We were able to find a mill space that serves all our purposes and still has a lot of charm."



"Affordable housing is a problem throughout the state."



CCRI, Newport

"From Woonsocket to Westerly there are wonderful neighborhoods in every community."





### GOAL 3: DEVELOP FIRST-CLASS SUPPORTING INFRASTRUCTURE

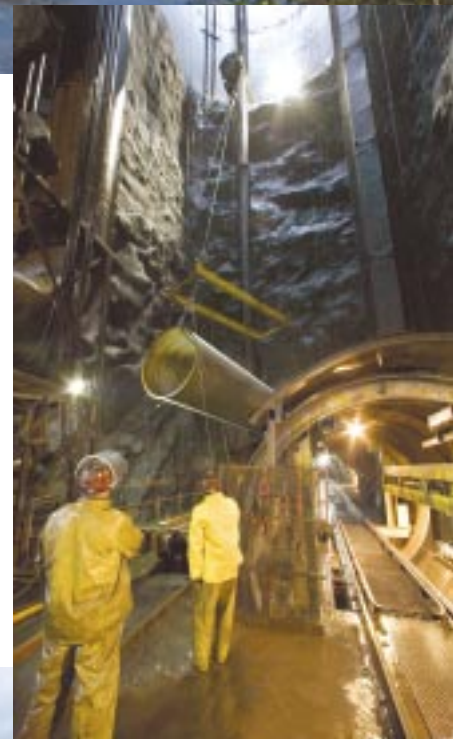
- Maintain public water and sewer systems and focus development around them
- Protect drinking water
- Avoid negative environmental impacts from development
- Map areas where services will be expanded
- Promote intermodal centers and transit
- Provide pedestrian connections
- Maintain functionality of roadways



Protect drinking water



Providence Sewage Tunnel



Providence

Woonsocket



*"I know many people who have left the suburbs to move into Providence. They like living in a city."*



Interstate 195 bridge



# Goal 3: Develop First-class Supporting Infrastructure

Explore new technologies while expanding current facilities that attract businesses and tourists to Rhode Island



Warwick Intermodal Facility, Rhode Island Airport Corporation.

*"The most important asset this business has is our employees, and Rhode Island was affordable and a place people wanted to live."*



Narragansett



Portsmouth

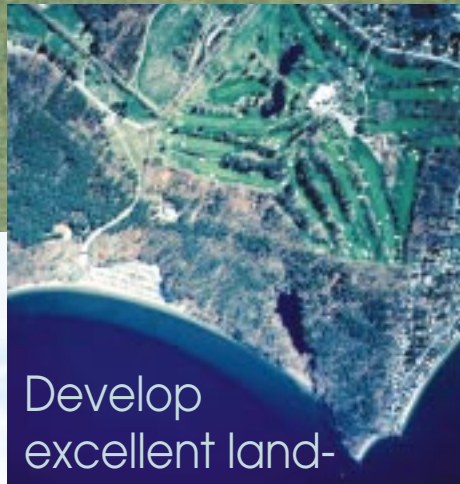


# Goal 4: Implement the Vision



## GOAL 4: IMPLEMENT THE VISION

- Reform Rhode Island's property tax system
- Require current land-use plans and coordinated regulations at state and local levels
- Develop excellent land-use information and technology systems
- Train and support municipal planning officials
- Update state planning enabling legislation
- Better integrate state and municipal planning systems
- Support regional efforts
- Establish growth center investment strategies



Develop excellent land-use information and technology systems



Westerly

