

GROWTH CENTERS

State Guide Plan Element 121: Land Use 2010 encourages “*development of new growth centers or villages that incorporate the concepts of this land use plan. Those concepts include: encouraging compact, mixed-use development; preserving open space; conserving natural resources; fitting the type of development to the capability of the land to support development and to the availability of infrastructure; and promoting a sense of community.*”

A *Report of the Governor’s Growth Planning Council – Growth Centers: Recommendations for Encouraging Growth and Investment in Economically and Environmentally Sound Locations in Rhode Island* (<http://www.planning.ri.gov/gpc/pdf/gpc.pdf>) defined these areas as “*dynamic and efficient centers for development that have a core of commercial and community services, residential development, and natural and built landmarks and boundaries that provide a sense of place.*” The report outlines a process where communities may volunteer to identify and the state approves growth centers. Communities benefit by identifying where they want growth to occur and, at the same time, directing growth away from areas where it should not be encouraged. The state and other levels of government benefit by identifying areas where they can best leverage investment of limited resources.

It is intended that state recognition of local growth centers will facilitate better access to the resources and technical assistance necessary to implement this land use option. Communities are encouraged, as an option, to identify and designate growth centers in their land use elements that are consistent with the above definition and, as applicable to the selected approach, to the following criteria.

1. Strengthen and encourage growth in existing centers

Criteria:

The preferred locations for growth centers are areas with existing infrastructure and public services.

"Infrastructure" is defined here as adequate public water service, public sewerage system or wastewater management district, and transportation facilities and/or services.

Infill projects, reuse of brownfields sites, and conversion of underutilized structures have priority over greenfields sites.

2. Scale new infrastructure to support compact growth

Criteria:

Planned infrastructure is sized to support designated compact growth, not a sprawl development pattern.

New growth centers have adequate infrastructure either in place, or planned for a time-frame to coincide with development of the new center, as documented in the Facilities and Services Element of the local Comprehensive Plan.

Compact design minimizes the amount of land consumed on a per capita, per dwelling, and per job basis.

3. Include mixed land uses

Criteria:

Centers include a mix of housing, significant employment opportunities, schools, commercial and industrial uses, and civic/public spaces and buildings.

Single-use developments, such as industrial parks, are appropriate within growth centers if they represent one component of a mix of land uses within that center.

Community comprehensive plan and zoning ordinances allow a mix of land uses to coexist within a center.

4. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices

Criteria:

Residential housing includes a range of housing opportunities, including single-family and multiple-household units for purchase or rental, and should cover a range of prices to address a full spectrum of income levels.

Community comprehensive plan and zoning ordinances allow and encourage a mix of housing types in centers.

5. Protect and enhance critical environmental resources

Criteria:

The center avoids converting working lands, such as prime farmland and forestland, into development.

The center avoids fragmenting existing greenspace, especially natural habitats and forests. Centers provide community green spaces designed for multiple uses (such as parks, sports fields, walking, biking, greenways, and water sports), and contribute to creating community/statewide, inter-connected greenspace/greenway networks wherever possible.

The center protects the local watershed and/or does not negatively impact critical and/or resource areas

Critical Resource areas are defined as Public water supply watersheds; Groundwater aquifers; Wellhead Protection Areas; Rare/unique habitat; High value recreational waters; Critical habitat for economically and/or ecologically valuable species.

The center does not negatively impact unique cultural resource areas.

Unique resource areas are defined as scenic vistas; archeological/historic sites; unfragmented forestland.

6. Provide a variety of transportation choices

Criteria:

Locations with convenient access to mass transit (existing or planned) are preferred. Centers are encouraged to include public transit hubs/stations to connect local routes.

Center layout, density, and design should encourage public transit, walking, and biking over automobile use for local trips

Automobile traffic is accommodated by inter-connected street patterns providing multiple routes to minimize congestion.

7. Promote community design that contributes to a sense of place

Criteria:

Community design within the centers encourages interactions among people, facilitate vibrant and safe street life, and maximize a strong sense of local community in harmony with the natural setting.

The streets have been designed with sidewalks and walkways, appropriate lighting, and connectedness, to promote easy and safe walking.

The center has committed to using older and historic buildings.

Centers exhibit several or all of the characteristics of walkable communities: physical indicators of where the neighborhood begins and ends, relatively narrow streets with sidewalks, residential buildings in close proximity to commercial destinations, non-residential buildings with many windows and doors set close to the street, building entrances accessible to sidewalks, on-street parking, trees and/or architectural elements that protect pedestrians from weather, use of traffic calming devices including right-angled street corners, grid street pattern with connectivity to adjoining neighborhoods, and streetscapes that include amenities such as benches, good lighting, informative signage, and plantings.

8. Encourage growth in appropriately scaled centers

Criteria:

While the configuration of an identified growth center will vary from community to community, in accordance with community character and type of center desired by the municipality, growth centers should be small enough to be comfortably walked. Except in the state's five historic urban core communities¹, municipally-identified growth centers should be no larger than an area with an approximately ¼ to ½ mile radius from its center to its edge in all directions (approximately ½ square mile to maximum of 1 square mile area).

Local governments can identify growth centers through the existing comprehensive planning process, either through the regularly-scheduled five-year comprehensive plan update, or through a comprehensive plan amendment. In order to be considered for state level approval, the identification by a local government of a growth center within its jurisdiction should include updates or amendments of all applicable elements of the community's comprehensive plan needed to incorporate the growth center as part of the plan and ensure internal consistency of all elements with regard to the addition of the growth center. The growth center amendment must include:

- A map depicting the proposed growth center boundaries in relation to the municipal jurisdiction, and showing existing development and land uses in the proposed growth center;

¹ Providence, Woonsocket, Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Newport.

- A narrative section describing the characteristics of the proposed growth center, and how the proposal fits the definitions and meets the criteria of growth centers enumerated above;
- A vision statement for the proposed growth center;
- Proposed amendments of applicable elements of the community's comprehensive plan and future land use map, including all necessary revisions to Plan to ensure internal consistency.;
- Proposed amendment of the implementation element of the comprehensive plan that describes a list of action steps the local government proposes to take to direct development, redevelopment and/or other investments to the proposed growth center. Such steps could include waiver of local license and permit fees for development within the growth center, expedited local government permitting, prioritization of local infrastructure spending within the growth center, adoption of zoning overlays or "smart growth" codes and ordinances to promote growth in targeted areas;
- A statement discussing whether and how the implementation of the proposed growth center will impact development and investment patterns outside of the growth center;

Whether submitted as a comprehensive plan amendment or as part of a five-year plan update, the proposed growth center will be reviewed by the Statewide Planning Program in conjunction with other agencies as appropriate, and will be reviewed and acted on in accordance with the comprehensive plan regulations by the Director of the Department of Administration. This review process will ensure that the identified growth area is consistent with existing statutes and policies and with the State Guide Plan, and that the proposed growth center is consistent with the definition and criteria described above.

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