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Related Topic Areas: Brownfields; Capital Improvement Program; Downtown Revitalization; Facilities Management; Housing Programs; Land Use & Development Regulations; Open Space & Resource Protection Programs; Parking; Public Transportation (Transit); Roads & Highways; Transfer of Development Rights

Growth Centers

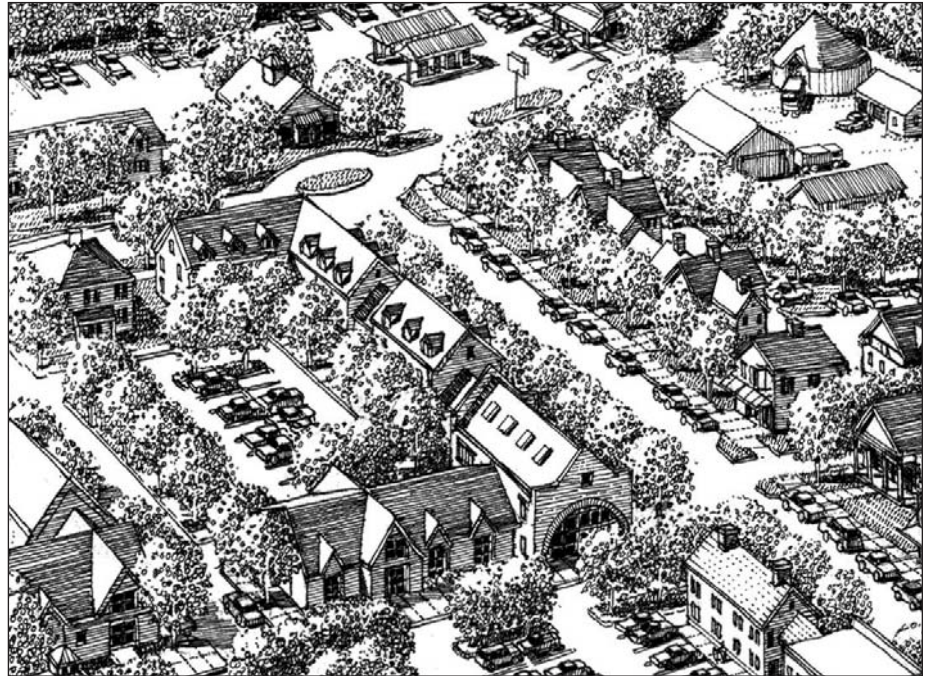
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Overview

The idea of growth centers as a land use strategy has been discussed in Vermont for at least forty years. It led to the establishment of Act 250 criteria addressing the impacts of growth on public investments and the costs of scattered development. In 1988, the state enacted Act 200, Vermont's Growth Management Act, amending municipal planning and development laws to further address patterns of development and the impacts of growth (24 V.S.A. Chapter 117). Act 200 added several state planning goals to Chapter 117, including a primary goal to "plan development to maintain the historic settlement pattern of compact village and urban centers separated by rural countryside" (§4302).

This was followed in 1994 by the creation of the Vermont Downtown Program, which provides incentives for development within state-designated downtowns, villages, and new town centers (24 V.S.A. Chapter 76A). The Vermont Downtown Program is discussed further in the topic paper on downtown revitalization.

Various definitions of growth area or growth center were proposed during the 1990s—some so expansive that any type of development qualified as a growth center. The Vermont Planners Association (VPA) published *Growth Centers in Vermont: A Vermont Solution to Sprawl* (1998). Rather than a simple definition, the report recommended a set of defining characteristics for growth centers. Versions of the VPA definition have since been incorporated in state plans and policies and under recently enacted growth center legislation.



By designating growth centers, communities can accommodate anticipated growth within a set boundary—extending the existing pattern of development while maintaining a clear edge between town and countryside. Growth centers typically include a mix of uses and public amenities and benefit from access to existing municipal infrastructure.

So what is a growth center? As a concept, a growth center is a pattern of concentrated, higher-density, mixed-use development that:

- replicates and builds upon traditional patterns of development;
- is defined by an urban growth or infrastructure service area boundary;
- is planned to accommodate most anticipated growth in the community without resulting in widely scattered, low-density sprawl;
- is supported by public investment in infrastructure, within designated service areas;
- features a variety of land uses, including formal and informal public spaces; and
- supports walking, public transit, and alternative forms of transportation.

Perhaps most important, growth centers should have clearly delineated boundaries and exhibit densities of development that are higher than densities found outside delineated areas. An area simply designated for future development without appropriate design or density characteristics would not qualify, nor would an isolated tract of land proposed as a single

Are Growth Centers Right for Your Community?

Growth center strategies are especially useful for promoting:

- infill and expansion of existing downtown and village centers
- development of new town centers in communities where there is no existing center, or existing centers can no longer accommodate anticipated growth

purpose development, such as an industrial or office park. On the other hand, well-planned growth centers should incorporate and integrate in their overall design areas for civic, commercial, and industrial uses; residential neighborhoods; and parks and open space.

In 2006, the state enacted legislation to further encourage growth center planning and development (Act 183). This legislation established a formal process for state designation of locally planned growth centers and a number of related incentives for growth center investment and development.

Application

Growth center planning really begins at the local level with the development or update of the municipal plan, as described in Chapter 117 (§4382). Planning that results in state growth designation must include the following:

1. **Projections.** One of the foundations of effective growth center planning is the development of realistic estimates of growth, projected over twenty years or more. These projections form the basis for determining how much area should be included within growth center boundaries and also the capacities of supporting infrastructure needed to accommodate planned densities of development within the designated area.
2. **Growth Center Design and Build-out.** Local planners also need to determine how developing areas will be integrated into the overall pattern of development in ways that meet the definition and characteristics of a growth center described above.

Growth Center Definition

24 V.S.A. §2791

Growth center means an area of land that contains substantially the characteristics specified (below) and that is located in one or a combination of the following:

- A designated downtown, village center, or new town center;
- An area of land that is in or adjacent to a designated downtown, village center, or new town center, with clearly defined boundaries that have been approved by one or more municipalities in their municipal plans to accommodate a majority of growth anticipated by the municipality or municipalities over a 20 year period. Adjacent areas shall include those lands which are contiguous to the designated downtown, village center, or new town center... [or] lands lying close to and not widely separated from the majority of the lands within the designated growth center

A growth center contains substantially the following characteristics:

1. It incorporates a mix of uses that typically include. . . the following: retail, office, services, and other commercial, civic, recreational, industrial, and residential uses, including affordable housing and new residential neighborhoods, within a densely developed, compact area;
2. It incorporates existing or planned public spaces that promote social interaction, such as public parks, civic buildings (e.g., post office, municipal offices), community gardens, and other formal and informal places to gather.
3. It is organized around one or more central places or focal points, such as prominent buildings of civic, cultural, or spiritual significance or a village green, common, or square.
4. It promotes densities of land development that are significantly greater than existing and allowable densities in parts of the municipality that are outside a designated downtown,

village center, growth center, or new town center or, in the case of municipalities characterized predominately by areas of existing dense urban settlement, it encourages in-fill development and redevelopment of historically developed land.

5. It is supported by existing or planned investments in infrastructure and encompasses a circulation system that is conducive to pedestrian and other non-vehicular traffic and that incorporates, accommodates, and supports the use of public transit systems.
6. It results in compact concentrated areas of land development that are served by existing or planned infrastructure and are separated by rural countryside or working landscape.
7. It is planned in accordance with the planning and development goals under section 4302 of this title (Chapter 117 planning goals), and to conform to smart growth principles.
8. It is planned to reinforce the purposes of 10 V.S.A. Chapter 151 (Act 250).

Growth Center Planning Goal

24 V.S.A. §4302(b)(A)

(1) To plan development to maintain the historic settlement pattern of compact village and urban centers separated by rural countryside.

(A) Intensive residential development should be encouraged primarily in areas related to community centers, and strip development along highways should be discouraged.

(B) Economic growth should be encouraged in locally designated growth areas, or employed to revitalize existing village and urban centers, or both.

(C) Public investments, including the construction or expansion of infrastructure, should reinforce the general character and planned growth patterns of the area.

3. Rural Lands. Finally, the growth center plan should address ways to discourage development outside the delineated growth center to protect the rural character and working landscape of outlying lands.

4. Implementation Program. The growth center plan should include an implementation program that documents how and when various steps in growth center development will be accomplished. The implementation program must include the adoption of local land use regulations that accommodate anticipated types and densities of development and a capital improvement program that schedules the financing and construction of supporting infrastructure.

Applications for state growth center designation are reviewed and decided by an expanded Vermont Downtown Board—a version of the same state board that designates downtowns, village centers, and new town centers. Municipalities that have not yet achieved downtown, village, or new town center designation may apply for such designation concurrently with their application for

growth center designation. A proposed growth center will be approved by the state board if it concludes that the application satisfies all the statutory criteria. For a complete list of state growth center application and designation requirements and other information, see the *Growth Center Planning Manual* described in box below. State growth center designation confers a number of potential benefits to the municipality and to individual property owners or developers within the growth center. Growth center designation benefits include:

Regulatory Incentives. A municipality can request that the Land Use Panel review the growth center application and issue findings and conclusions under various Act 250 criteria. These findings and conclusions are then binding under any subsequent Act 250 review of development within the growth center. The District Environmental Commission also can consider proposed forms of off-site mitigation of impacts on important resources located within the growth center, including the off-site mitigation of primary agricultural soils at lower mitigation ratios. Finally, the municipality or property owners within the growth center may seek a master plan permit to streamline Act 250 approval of individual projects within the area of the growth center covered by the master plan.

Financial Incentives. Municipalities with designated growth centers are eligible to create tax increment financing (TIF) districts within the growth center to fund needed infrastructure improvements. Vermont Economic Development Authority (VEDA) incentives are also available for projects within designated growth centers. Priority is also given to growth centers, after designated downtowns and village centers, for state public facility investments, including funding for wastewater management facilities, technical and financial assistance for brownfield remediation, community development

block grant program (CDBG) implementation grants, and other benefits as they become available.

Other State Incentives. Projects within designated growth centers also receive priority, after designated downtown and village centers, for downtown transportation funds, transportation enhancement improvements, and grants for housing renovation and affordable housing construction programs. State officials responsible for selecting sites for the lease or construction of state buildings are also required to consider growth center locations.

Altogether, incentives are provided both to encourage municipalities to plan for and establish growth centers and to encourage property owners

Assistance for Growth Center Planning

Act 183, passed in 2006 instructs regional planning commissions to provide growth center planning as part of their ongoing technical assistance to municipalities. It also creates a planning coordination group—staffed jointly by the Department of Housing and Community Affairs and the Land Use Panel of the Natural Resources Board—to provide assistance to municipalities preparing applications for growth center designation.

The *Growth Center Planning Manual* identifies the available state resources, the issues that should be addressed in planning for growth center designation, and accepted methods for growth projections, build-out analyses, area calculations, infrastructure planning, and resource and open space protection and mitigation. Contact the Department of Housing and Community Affairs, Downtown Program for copies or download from www.dhca.state.vt.us.

Growth center planning is given priority status under the state's municipal planning grant and community development block grant programs.

Establishing a Growth Center Boundary

Some of the most critical considerations in growth center designation arise in the process of delineating growth center boundaries. Boundaries clearly define those areas within and outside of a proposed growth center and the application of associated development and resource protection policies. Related considerations include but are not limited to:

- the area to be included within the designated growth center—for example, as determined from build-

out analyses—to accommodate projected growth at planned densities of development and avoid the potential for low-density or leapfrog development within the growth center;

- the delineation of boundaries that incorporate and extend a designated downtown or village or new town center;
- the delineation of boundaries that incorporate existing and planned infrastructure service areas, such as public water, wastewater, stormwater, road, and transit systems;
- the development suitability of land

within the proposed growth center to minimize, for example, erosion, flood, and other potential development hazards;

- the incorporation of natural features within the growth center that serve as “green infrastructure,” such as wooded areas, wetlands, and buffered stream corridors; and
- the exclusion and protection, to the extent feasible, of critical natural resources, such as primary agricultural soils, earth resources, aquifer recharge areas, and critical wildlife habitat.

and developers to invest in and construct compact developments within them.

As a land use planning concept, growth centers represent a comprehensive approach for addressing some of the shortcomings of recent low-density suburban and exurban patterns of development. Growth centers apply “smart growth principles” (also defined in state legislation) to development in Vermont and rep-

resent a conscious attempt to reinforce and extend traditional settlement patterns that have contributed so much to our quality of life.

Considerations

A community that doesn’t expect much growth in coming decades may decide not to pursue formal growth center designation but can nevertheless benefit from directing development to locally designated growth centers under its local plan and land use regulations. Larger growth centers—including those that serve as regional commercial or employment centers—may encompass land in more than one municipality, and therefore also require some regional coordination.

While most of the 2006 legislation focused on the planning and development of compact, mixed-use centers,

it recognized that what happens in the remainder of the community is also important. Indeed, if growth center planning is to be truly effective, it must be paired with tools to discourage and limit development outside growth centers. Possible tools to achieve this objective include land use regulations, conservation subdivision design, the transfer or purchase of development rights, and other open space protection strategies. (See related topic papers.)

Implementing growth center plans takes considerable time. Even in the most rapidly growing Vermont municipalities, growth occurs incrementally. It’s appropriate that growth center planning looks forward for twenty years or more. It’s also important that municipalities monitor cumulative development and its effects to ensure that growth center objectives are being achieved.

More Information

To learn more about growth center planning and the designation program or obtain a copy of the *Growth Center Planning Manual*, contact the Downtown Program at the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Affairs (DHCA) at 800-622-4553 or www.dhca.state.vt.us.