

VERMONT FOOD SYSTEM PLAN ISSUE BRIEF



ISSUE: Land Use Planning

What's At Stake?

Land use planning is an important tool for aligning settlement patterns and natural resource management with Vermont residents' values. Community-level plans and policies affect many concrete land management and development decisions in Vermont. It is difficult to support farm viability without intentional local and regional land use policies that preserve agricultural land, and without a culture that values the services and economic opportunities provided by the natural resource. Land use policies are living documents, and economic, demographic, and geographic shifts call for a thorough updating of existing plans and policies. Communities empowered to directly engage with the food and agriculture community, and to proactively plan for transitions happening beyond municipal borders, will both protect our existing agricultural land base and increase economic opportunity throughout the whole food system, including processing and distribution, market development, and food access.

Current Conditions

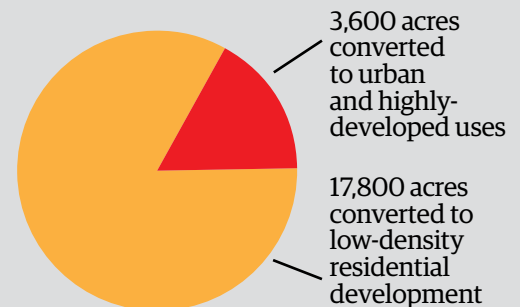
Vermont is divided among 11 regional planning commissions (RPCs), each with a regional land use plan, and as of 2017, 84% of Vermont municipalities had also adopted a municipal plan.¹ State planning statutes require regional and municipal plans to include a land-use map and policies for preservation of natural and scenic resources, as well as sections on other topics related to the food system such as economic development, flood resilience, housing, and transportation. RPC staff also encourage municipalities to include food access considerations in their plans.

Land use planning is a highly effective (and cost-efficient) form of farmland preservation, and includes an array of regulatory tools such as zoning, conservation subdivision design, and overlay districts. State-level review of proposed development under Act 250 requires conformance with local and regional plans, which gives these plans additional legal weight when Act 250 is triggered. However, Act 250 is not itself a statewide land use plan, and many developments are designed to avoid triggering Act 250 jurisdiction, leaving local policies as the only regulatory oversight.

A tendency in traditional planning to characterize farmland as "open space" can diminish the understanding of farms as businesses and downplay the importance of supporting farms through economic development initiatives as well as land preservation. However, there are mechanisms by which planning can support the agricultural economy. For example, a local food economy depends on adequate aggregation and processing infrastructure, which depends upon not only development regulations but also utilities such as water and wastewater processing, all within the purview of planning.

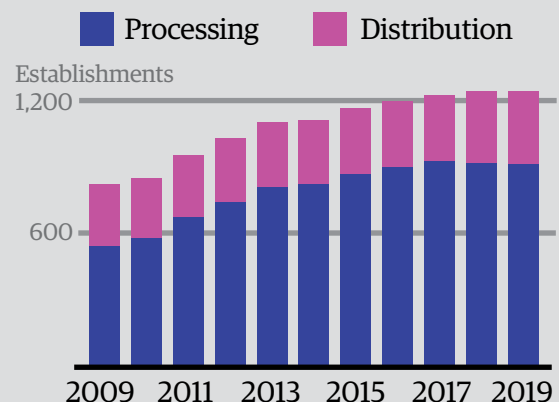
Planning is also an important and increasingly utilized tool for improving food access at several points in the supply chain. For example, food access is dependent upon food retailers. The location of these retailers can be influenced by zoning regulations or development incentives, or location challenges can be mitigated through better transportation planning (see [Food Security brief](#).)

From 2001-2016, approximately 21,400 acres of Vermont farmland were compromised by development.



Vermont Food Manufacturing, Storage, and Wholesale Distribution Establishments

The growth in Vermont's food system over the past decade has required an increase in processing and distribution infrastructure, and additional capacity will be needed if this growth is to continue.



Bottlenecks & Gaps

- Most existing zoning relies on minimum lot size requirements, which do not preserve farmland from low-density residential development and can actually lead to greater loss of farmland as housing units are forced to spread out over a larger acreage.
- Much of the farmland currently protected by planning and conservation efforts is located along waterways. Additional land must be protected to provide an adequate land base in the face of increased erosion and flooding and other impacts of climate change (see [Climate Change brief](#)).
- The regulatory framework for accessory on-farm businesses (e.g., paid farm stays) is confusing; these are often essential for maintaining farm viability and can be regulated by municipalities.
- Land use tools for protecting farmland can overly restrict development of agricultural workforce housing, processing and distribution infrastructure, and retail venues.
- Volunteer planners may feel disempowered or lack information on how to support the local food system.

Opportunities

- Criterion 9(B) of Act 250 is a strong tool in Vermont law that ensures that development within its jurisdiction maintains the agricultural potential of Vermont's important farmland and which can be leveraged in conjunction with local plans.
- RPCs and other planning entities can provide resources — including expertise and funding — to municipalities for strategic planning around the food system.
- Many Vermonters value the aesthetic, economic, environmental, cultural, and culinary contributions of farm businesses, and most local planning commissions are supportive of preserving the working landscape.
- Land use planning frameworks that incorporate economic development principles, such as “smart growth” and “placemaking” frameworks, can be leveraged to support food system considerations.
- Existing geographic research data, if aggregated and made widely available, would enable local land use planning to incorporate a greater understanding of both local conditions and the wider food system (e.g., mapping of geographic barriers to food retail stores).

Recommendations

- Create a new position at the Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets or Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD), to develop and disseminate resources and trainings on agricultural economic development and its role in farmland conservation, best practices for municipal support of agricultural facilities (e.g., slaughterhouses), and best practices for creating housing within agricultural districts. Cost: 1 FTE \$125,000 per year; \$50,000 for resources development and training.
- Map Vermont's agricultural land base and production capacity, including geographic data about predicted climate change impacts, aggregation and distribution infrastructure, and regional dietary needs. Disseminate this information to communities to help inform land use decisions and prioritize use of state funding and incentives. Potential partners include UVM, the Vermont Center for Geographic Information, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Cost: \$250,000 over 2 years.
- Create a permit specialist or ombudsperson position to assist farm businesses in navigating municipal and state land use permitting requirements, especially regarding on-farm accessory businesses and farm employee housing. Cost: 1 FTE: \$100,000 per year (potentially as part-time positions in multiple regions).
- Provide trainings for local and regional planners to educate landowners about climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies that minimize land loss. As a first step, the Vermont Association of Planning Districts and Development Agencies and the Vermont State Conservation Districts should convene to assess what is already being done and how to increase this capacity within the planning community.
- Fund ACCD to include agricultural stakeholders in its smart growth and downtown development programs (e.g., the Better Places program). Cost: \$25,000 per year minimum.

Farm to Plate is Vermont's food system plan being implemented statewide to increase economic development and jobs in the farm and food sector and improve access to healthy local food for all Vermonters.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFAM) facilitates, supports, and encourages the growth and viability of agriculture in Vermont while protecting the working landscape, human health, animal health, plant health, consumers, and the environment.

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For end notes and data sources, and to read other food system briefs, visit vtfarmtoplate.com/plan