
A Balanced Growth Strategy for Connecticut
Reinvesting in Core Areas and Preserving Character While
Respecting Markets and Citizens' Freedom to Choose



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A Balanced Growth Vision for Connecticut

The Connecticut Partnership for Balanced Growth (CPBG) believes that Connecticut can strike a balance between development and conservation. However, if we are to strike a balance between development and conservation we need to approach the discussion around responsible growth from a realistic perspective. Connecticut must embrace growth and development if we are to maintain and enhance our economic prosperity. If we are to grow, then we must understand that we cannot and will not conserve and preserve all undeveloped land. In addition, we must realize that our cities and core areas could never accommodate all of our future growth.

CPBG also understands that some places need to be preserved. We believe that in conservation and development we want to make certain that evolving "responsible growth" principles don't come to mean "no growth" for Connecticut, but instead provide citizens with reasonable choices for where they want to live, work, play and shop.

To maintain Connecticut's economic prosperity and high quality of life and to accomplish balanced growth we need a strategy that will conserve and preserve those valuable areas that need protecting (i.e. critical habitats, prime agricultural soils, natural resources, and open space for both passive and active recreation). We also need an aggressive growth strategy that creates new investment in our core areas, encourages more growth in our second and third ring suburbs, encourages conservation efforts in the most rural areas, and encourages development and conservation that respect markets and citizens' freedom to choose.

These Balanced Growth Strategies provided in this comprehensive Balanced Growth document will ensure that Connecticut can balance its need for growth with both conservation and preservation strategies. It will also ensure that planning policies are integrated between the state, regional, and local levels of government without forcing a top down approach to planning on regions and municipalities. In addition, this integration of planning will give due consideration to the state's Growth Management policies that are provided in the state plan of conservation and development, but it will not mandate strict consistency between plans and between regulations. This will allow for a flexible and fluid planning and regulatory process that will allow Connecticut to plan for growth and conservation and adjust quickly to changing conditions and needs.



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A Core Area (Urban & First Ring Suburban) Strategy

Responsible Growth advocates for reinvestment in our cities and core areas and investment in areas with existing infrastructure. However, this Responsible Growth principle is often based on assumptions that if we target investments in the core and restrict or stop growth in the suburban fringe areas, then we will revitalize our cities and stop sprawl. Unfortunately, this approach falls short of recognizing and addressing the issues that have created soft market core areas, and the responsible growth agenda does not provide new strategies or solutions as to how we create meaningful change in core areas.

Our Balanced Growth principles go beyond what is being proposed as responsible growth and recognizes that market factors and consumer preferences play a key role in determining locations for development. The Balanced Growth principles also provide specific strategies and solutions for Connecticut to best encourage growth and conservation.

Cities, towns, and neighborhoods are not static. They are living, changing environments that evolve over time. Older cities, towns and neighborhoods developed at a specific time to meet market demands and consumer preferences of that time. Their urban form is based largely on their locations, past and present transportation networks, and the economics that drove their industries. But market demands, technologies, consumer preferences, transportation networks and technologies, and economic conditions change over time. Today, in some cases, once vibrant and successful cities, towns, and neighborhoods (core areas) now struggle to compete in both the local and regional markets. They struggle to compete for residential development, commercial development, and investment.

A Core Area Strategy must recognize the factors that created soft market conditions in many of these areas. These factors include older, outdated commercial and industrial buildings, brownfields, an aging and often poorly maintained housing stock that lacks modern amenities, struggling school systems, an aging and often inadequate infrastructure, concentrations of poverty, higher crime rates, large municipal government with high costs, limited property for taxation, and consumer preferences for lower density, suburban locations with single family homes and yards for kids to play in.

Recognizing these issues that face our core areas and the market factors that make it difficult for these areas to compete is the first step to developing meaningful public policy to create change. CPBG recognizes that the process of improving our cities and other core areas is a difficult one. Our Core Area Strategies are a first step to assist in repositioning our core areas to better compete for investment. The Balanced Growth Strategies for Core Areas are:



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- **Reduce barriers to investment:** Many barriers to investment exist in core areas. To better encourage and attract investment, focus on reducing or eliminating these barriers. Provide greater incentives for brownfield redevelopment and reduce or eliminate liability to such development for new investors. Eliminate or reduce development fees (permit fees and inspection fees), encourage pre-approved shovel ready sites, and require as-of-right approval for land use decisions. Reduce regulations or provide flexible regulations or waivers to eliminate additional costs to redevelopment. (i.e. strict historic preservation requirements, strict building, fire, and health codes that don't apply well to older buildings, and lengthy permitting processes.)
- **Land based taxation:** Allow cities or specific districts within cities to utilize land based taxation strategies to encourage the use and development of vacant land and to discourage speculative land banking.
- **Invest in housing and neighborhoods:** Restructure state housing programs to target investment into housing and focus the outcomes of such investment on improving the housing stock, encouraging property maintenance, adding amenities, providing workforce housing to support job growth, and preserving historic homes and neighborhood character. Most existing programs target providing homes for low and moderate income households as the outcome, not improving housing or neighborhoods. We need to improve investment in housing and neighborhoods and serve a wider range of income levels.
- **Invest in building the working class:** Most government programs for housing and community development target low and moderate income households. This often creates an outcome that clusters these households in already weak and distressed areas. In addition, such households often don't have the resources to maintain and improve the homes they own. Therefore, well intended housing programs often undermine attempts to improve housing and neighborhoods. If the goal is to improve core areas then we need to build upon the strengths of the working class and retain and attract working class households. State housing programs that target low and moderate income households should be restructured and expanded to include support and provide opportunities for working class households. Therefore, the income limits for these programs should be increased to 120 percent of median household income.
- **Greater funding of PILOT:** CPBG is hesitant to support policies that may increase taxes at the state level. However, we recognize that many cities are faced with a significantly limited tax base due to larger areas of land occupied by government and non-profit entities that do not pay taxes. Therefore, CPBG supports greater funding of PILOT.



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A Second and Third Ring Suburban Strategy

The second and third ring suburban areas are the areas experiencing the greatest growth and development within our state, and they provide our greatest potential for future growth and development. Adopting policies that reduce growth in these areas or make development more difficult in these areas would be a great mistake. We need to implement policies that encourage growth in these areas since they are the areas where residential and commercial market demands are the greatest and they are where the largest numbers of consumers (citizens) want to live, work, shop, and play. The Balanced Growth Strategies for Second and Third Ring Suburban areas are:

- **Encourage higher density commercial and residential development:** These areas are best suited for “responsible growth strategies” such as transit oriented development, mixed use and mixed income development, and affordable workforce housing. State resources should be targeted and existing state programs restructured to encourage all forms of development in these growth areas.
- **Invest in infrastructure:** These areas are often served by existing infrastructure and have the potential for new and expanded infrastructure to support additional development and future growth. The state should be investing in the existing infrastructure and encouraging the expansion and development of new infrastructure to encourage and support new growth in these areas. Balanced Growth is about identifying those areas that are in the best position to grow and encouraging such growth.
- **Encourage density:** State policies should encourage greater density in these areas. The more development that can be accommodated in these areas and in core areas, the less development pressure that will be placed on more rural areas.
- **Encourage planning for growth and improved land use approval processes:** The state should encourage and provide incentives to communities in these areas to better plan for growth (i.e. technical assistance, planning grants, and economic development grants). Encourage more as-of-right land use approvals and remove discretion from as-of-right approvals. Local Plans of Conservation and Development should encourage growth and higher density growth and fully implement the balanced criteria contained in the existing planning enabling act (C.G.S 8-23).
- **Conservation in suburban areas:** Encouraging growth in these areas does not mean we must sacrifice all land and open space. State policies and resources can still support the preservation of the most sensitive natural areas and prime agricultural land. Open space conservation should also target active recreation (i.e. the creation of parks and trail systems) since active recreation facilities and parks will enhance the built environment and enhance the quality of life in these areas.



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A Rural Conservation Strategy

Conservation and preservation are as important as growth and development. Preserving our New England character is very important to our quality of life. However, conservation and preservation should not be encouraged or implemented as a means to prohibit or limit growth and development. Our conservation and preservation policies and strategies must focus on protecting critical environments, natural resources, critical habitat, prime agricultural lands, and enhancing our quality of life. The Balanced Growth Strategies for Rural Conservation Areas are:

- **Target conservation efforts in rural areas:** State policies and resources should encourage conservation of farmland, open space, and critical habitat in small towns and rural areas. The State should develop a strategic conservation plan to protect our most valuable rural lands and focus programs in these areas. This should include the expansion of State Parks.
- **Small town economic development:** State policies should continue to provide economic development assistance to small towns. These small town centers are a vital part of our economy and character. Existing programs and policies should target town centers and encourage village districts.
- **Infrastructure investment:** Investments in infrastructure should be targeted into town centers and adjacent areas to support higher density development in and near the centers.
- **Conservation subdivision:** Rural and small towns should be encouraged to implement conservation subdivision regulations that allow for higher density development while preserving open space. The state should encourage and promote the use of Alternative Treatment Systems for waste water disposal to accommodate higher density developments in town and village centers.
- **Support agriculture:** State policies and strategies should support agricultural activities in rural areas, on prime agricultural soils, and where agriculture is economically feasible. Policies should also support, encourage, and aid in making agriculture economically feasible. However, we must be realistic in this approach and recognize that we are not an agrarian society and will never return to the agricultural economy of the 1700's and 1800's.
- **Rural development:** While seeking to implement these conservation policies, it is important to recognize that rural areas also need to develop to serve the needs of rural populations. Therefore, conservation and preservation programs should be targeted toward critical habitats and agricultural resources but not used to prohibit or limit development. Such an emphasis would harm the states overall economic and job growth.



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A Preservation Strategy

Connecticut is blessed with many historical, cultural, and natural assets. These assets define our state and enhance our ability to attract economic development and tourism. State policies need to encourage and aid in the preservation of our most critical assets and to position those assets to enhance our quality of life. The Balanced Growth Strategies for Preservation are:

- **Historic preservation:** Preservation policies and strategies should target economically feasible historic structures in urban, suburban, and rural areas. The economic feasibility of redeveloping or preserving historic buildings is often undermined by excessive code compliance cost. The state must encourage flexible building and health and safety codes and flexible land use regulations to make preservation less costly.
- **Cultural preservation:** Cultural assets of the state should be preserved and supported. These sites provide opportunities for tourism, education, and recreation. The state should continue to fund these programs and activities.
- **Natural areas and assets:** The State should focus preservation and conservation efforts on our most critical natural assets. These are State Parks, prime agricultural soil, critical habitat, endangered species, and scenic areas. State resources should be targeted at preserving these critical assets.
- **Preservation planning:** The state should conduct a comprehensive inventory of all of our historic, cultural, and natural resources and assets and develop a comprehensive plan for protecting and preserving such assets. The process should prioritize assets based on their significance and value and restructure programs and state funding accordingly. Preservation planning, strategies, and programs should not be viewed as a means to prevent growth and development, but to enhance our state and our quality of life. The plan should identify areas already preserved as well as priority areas that need to be preserved to focus the use of limited state and local preservation dollars.



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An Integrated Planning Strategy

The ongoing discussion regarding responsible growth has continually recommended a need for consistency in planning activities at the state, regional, and local levels of government. However, the proposed solutions have focused on a top down approach that forces state planning policies onto regions and municipalities and forces regional planning policies onto municipalities. This approach also recommends requiring local and regional plans of conservation and development to be consistent with the state plan of conservation and development. In addition, this approach insists that local land use regulations be consistent with the local plan of conservation and development.

CPBG believes that this top down approach and the requirements for strict consistency between state, regional, and local plans and local land use regulations and local plans is not the best approach to creating better planning practices. CPBG recommends a balanced growth approach that recognizes the different scale of planning that occurs at each level of government and the difference between planning and local land use regulations. Therefore, the aim is not to force planning policies from the top down or to require strict consistency, but to integrate and coordinate planning policies at the state, regional, and local levels of government. The Balanced Growth Strategies for Integrated Planning are:

- **State Plan of Conservation and Development:** The state plan of conservation and development must provide a vision for Connecticut and the general policies to implement that vision to help guide state agencies, regional planning organizations, and local planning commissions. The Growth Management principles provided in the state plan of conservation and development should be the guiding principles for the state's responsible growth strategy. In addition, state agencies and policy makers must recognize that the state plan of conservation and development is a vision and general guide for planning policies and that regional and local plans of conservation and development are created on a more detailed scale and are better suited to implement planning policies.
- **Regional Plans of Conservation and Development:** The legislature should require that regional plans of conservation and development consider and utilize the same Growth Management principles as the state plan of conservation and development. This would ensure that state and regional planning would be based on the same principles and objectives. This will provide an integration of state and regional planning policies and eliminate the need for consistency between plans that are created and intended for implementation at different scales. It is due to this difference in the scale of planning at the state and regional level that strict consistency should not be required.



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- **Municipal Plans of Conservation and Development:** State law already requires that local plans of conservation and development consider the Growth Management principles contained in the state plan of conservation and development. This is a very good and very effective policy that ensures the integration of planning policies at both the state and local level. The state must recognize that the local planning commissions are the most knowledgeable and qualified to make planning and policy decisions to implement the Growth Management policies. In addition, the most comprehensive and detailed plans are the local plans of conservation and development. Therefore, requiring both the regional and municipal plans to consider the state Growth Management policies creates integration of planning at all levels of government, while respecting the scale of planning and ensuring implementation occurs at the most comprehensive level of planning.
- **Municipal Land Use Regulations and Municipal Plans:** Municipal land use regulations (mostly zoning and subdivision regulations) are effective tools to implement many, but not all, aspects of the policies recommended within the local plan of conservation and development. In addition, planning is the prediction of future outcomes with the risk of being wrong. This risk of being wrong is caused by changing circumstances, conditions, and the wants and needs of the community over time. If this were not the case we would need to plan only once and never again. Therefore, both plans and regulations need to be flexible and fluid to adjust to change. It is for this reason that strict consistency between local land use regulations and plans of conservation should not be required.
- **Projects of Regional Significance:** There are some, but very few, development projects that rise to level of being regionally significant. Therefore, policies and procedures established to plan for and encourage such projects must ensure that they address only the projects that are truly regionally significant. It is critical that such policies are not created or implemented to add another level of approvals or a longer period to gain approvals. The aim must be to encourage projects of regional significance and to streamline the approval process. CPBG recommends that projects of regional significance be defined as:
a. commercial developments that include more than 500,000 square feet of building space, b. residential developments of more than 500 housing units, or developments that receive more than \$5,000,000 in state funds. The authority to approve these projects should remain with the local land use commissions provided the Growth Management principles are considered as part of the decision on approval. State agencies should be required to expedite state funding and state permits for such projects.



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Connecticut Needs Balanced Growth to Succeed

The Connecticut Partnership for Balanced Growth is committed to ensure a strong and prosperous future for the great State of Connecticut. We strongly believe that Connecticut can grow and develop in a responsible and balanced manner that also conserves and protects the character of our state. Our Balanced Growth Strategy provides the State with an opportunity to position Connecticut and all of its cities and towns to prosper from economic growth while balancing the needs for conservation and preservation.

Responsible growth must start with growth, because if we are not growing (population, jobs, businesses, and homes) we are dying. Economic growth and development are what have provided Connecticut with our high quality of life and great prosperity and success. We must continue our tradition and history as a strong leader in industry and business if we wish to maintain and improve our status as a great place to live and work.

To encourage growth Connecticut must create a streamlined land use approval process that is simple, swift, and certain. Doing so will provide confidence for investors and ensure the flow of investment into Connecticut. Achieving a simple, swift, and certain land use approval process must begin with eliminating discretion from as-of-right approvals.

The Connecticut Partnership for Balanced Growth is a coalition of municipal officials, businesses, community groups, associations and individuals dedicated to supporting a balanced approach to growth.

We believe that growth and economic development are essential to our state's economic prosperity and that evolving land use policies should provide citizens with reasonable choices for where they want to live, work, play and shop.

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P.O. Box 230154
Hartford, CT 06123-0154
Phone: 860-655-6897
Web: www.cpbg.org



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