

# GUIDING APPROPRIATE DEVELOPMENT

# 4

## Overview

Somers is recognized within the region as a desirable suburban community and there is little doubt based on population projections that it will continue to grow and change in the future. How this anticipated growth is managed will have a significant impact on future community character and quality of life in Somers.

Because the villages of Somers and Somersville are for the most part developed, future growth is most likely to occur in the outlying rural areas of the community. Unless this development is guided more appropriately, the current pattern of development will consume larger than necessary amounts of forest, farmland and wildlife habitat, irrevocably altering Somers' character and quality of life.

Major development issues facing Somers include:

- attracting appropriate commercial and industrial development;
- improving the design and appearance of commercial and industrial development;
- reusing the Somersville Manufacturing Company mill; and
- guiding more appropriate residential development.

*Somers needs to manage the environmental and visual impacts of development before residential "sprawl" and inappropriate commercial development erode Somers' character and quality of life.*

**Somersville Manufacturing Mill Complex**



**Conventional Residential Development**



*Economic development is an important issue in Somers, not only in terms of providing a diversified tax base, jobs and shopping opportunities, but from a community character standpoint as well.*

## **Encourage Appropriate Economic Development**

During public meetings held throughout the creation of this Plan, business development remained a major concern for Somers residents but not entirely for the reasons typically associated with this type of development. While residents understandably ranked improved tax base, availability of goods and services, and jobs as the top three reasons for encouraging economic development, their concern over business development focused as much on the quality and type of commercial and industrial development in town.

### **Attract and Retain Appropriate Businesses**

With its limited available commercial/industrial land, lack of direct access to an interstate highway and rural location, Somers is not positioned to become a major business destination. However, this does not mean that Somers is without economic development potential (as evidenced by the replacement of all of the jobs lost with the closing of the Somersville Manufacturing Company in 1970). Somers needs to make the most of its economic development potential by focusing on its strengths to attract new businesses and retain existing businesses.

### *Meet Residents' Everyday Shopping Needs*

Eighty percent of residents surveyed agreed that they would shop more in Somers if available goods and services met their everyday needs, indicating an untapped potential for commercial development that provides the basic necessities of daily living. Seventy-two percent of residents surveyed agreed that Somers needs a grocery store, a business capable of meeting many of those daily needs.

The following table illustrates estimated retail spending by Somers residents based on statewide averages. While Somers may not be an appropriate location to capture the majority of retail spending in categories such as automobiles and furniture (establishments better suited to regional shopping areas such as Enfield), \$19 million in food sales is more than enough to support a local grocery store, according to the Food Marketing Institute. Somers can probably support additional restaurants, apparel stores, small general merchandise stores, and similar establishments that also cater to everyday needs.

**2002 Retail Sales and Estimated Spending**

	<b>Statewide Per Capita Sales</b>	<b>Somers Estimated Spending</b>
<b>Apparel &amp; Accessories</b>	\$668	\$5,425,979
<b>Hardware</b>	\$808	\$6,564,146
<b>Eating &amp; Drinking</b>	\$991	\$8,050,683
<b>Home Furnishings &amp; Appliances</b>	\$1,066	\$8,659,137
<b>General Merchandise</b>	\$1,175	\$9,549,150
<b>Automotive Products</b>	\$2,527	\$20,532,343
<b>Food Products</b>	\$2,386	\$19,391,790
<b>Misc. Shopping Goods</b>	\$3,278	\$26,633,587
<b>Total Retail Sales</b>	\$12,898	\$104,806,816

Source: Connecticut Department of Revenue Services, Census Bureau, Planimetrics

Residents responding to a random telephone survey were asked about the mix of businesses in Somers. The results, tabulated below, indicate that (with the exception of light manufacturing facilities) the majority of residents feel that the amount and mix of businesses in Somers is about right. However, 31% to 49% of residents still expressed a need for more business, with the exception of automotive sales and repairs.

<b>Business</b>	<b>Too Many</b>	<b>About Right</b>	<b>Too Few</b>
<b>Light manufacturing facilities</b>	3%	43%	<b>49%</b>
<b>Restaurants</b>	4%	<b>55%</b>	41%
<b>Small specialty shops</b>	4%	<b>53%</b>	41%
<b>Offices</b>	2%	<b>61%</b>	31%
<b>Service businesses</b>	2%	<b>61%</b>	31%
<b>Automotive sales/repairs</b>	23%	<b>67%</b>	8%

Based on these findings, Somers should encourage a grocery store and other small businesses that cater to residents' daily needs. New light-manufacturing facilities, restaurants, and specialty shops are also appropriate based on community input, Somers' ability to accommodate them, and their potential impact on community character.

*Expand the Local Economy from Within*

Given Somers' attributes as a business location, attempting to attract major employers to town is not a good use of limited economic development resources. With much of the job growth in the U.S. economy occurring in small startup firms, Somers best strategy is to grow from within.

In today's wired global economy, multi-million dollar businesses are being conducted out of residential dwellings. As businesses add employees and outgrow the home environment, many owners will look to move locally rather than uproot their families. By protecting its community character and promoting home-based businesses, Somers can put its positive residential attributes to work by becoming an attractive place to live and start a business.

To help businesses remain competitive and grow, Somers newly appointed Economic Development Commission can play a proactive role by working with state and regional economic development agencies to act as a clearinghouse of information on available loans, training, and other programs available to small businesses; and to create a business visitation program to stay informed of the concerns and needs of the business community.

*Expand the Local Tourist Economy*

Route 190 from Hazardville to Stafford Springs has evolved into one of several scenic routes throughout the State that are frequented by tourists. As a result, Somers has a burgeoning tourist economy with several antique stores, gift shops, and other businesses that take advantage of Somers location and historic character. Events such as the Four Town Fair, the Hartford County 4-H Fair and mountain bike tours of the Shenipsit Trail also periodically attract visitors to Somers.

While the potential for this market is not without limits, by creating a critical mass of tourist-based businesses, Somers can become more of a tourist destination and less dependent on drive through traffic.

Historic mills throughout New England have been put to use as antique shops, Christmas shops, gift shops, and even furniture outlets. The Somersville Manufacturing Company could easily adapt a portion of its floor area to antique stores, boutiques and restaurants, becoming a centerpiece of the local tourist economy.

Historical and educational tourism is a major sector of the State's economy. The Somers Historical Society can play a role in attracting visitors, not only through its museum, but by sponsoring historic house tours and other events as well.

#### *Create a System of "Wayfinding" Signs*

Somers should investigate creating a system of "wayfinding" signs to direct residents and visitors to business activities as well as public and other facilities. Wayfinding signs can be used to direct motorists and pedestrians to community facilities such as Town Hall or the school / library campus, clusters of business activities such as shopping or dining (without specifically naming businesses), and even tourist destinations such as the fairgrounds or Soapstone Mountain.

#### **Consider Non-Traditional Forms of Economic Development**

##### *Promote Revenue Positive Housing*

When residents think of economic development, they tend to think of offices, retail stores, and light manufacturing uses, but there are other types of economic development that are not so obvious. Certain housing developments, such as assisted living facilities, age-restricted housing and even multi-family developments with limited bedrooms per unit, can be considered economic development because they generate more tax revenue than they require in services (based on few or no children and the cost of education representing more than two-thirds of the municipal budget).

In addition to the direct tax benefits that such development provides, when located near the villages, these uses can add vitality to the village centers, and support local businesses.

##### *Seek Restoration of PILOT Funding Levels*

Somers is home to several State correctional facilities and a State forest that are exempt from local property taxes. To compensate the Town for the loss of tax revenue, the State reimburses Somers through Payments In Lieu Of Taxes or PILOT payments. By statute, PILOT payments for correctional facilities should equal 100% of the taxes due on the assessed value of the property (State forest is lower) or \$2,266,933. In recent years, the State has reduced PILOT payments statewide with Somers receiving almost \$450,000 less than required in Fiscal Year (FY) 2003-2004 alone. Pilot payments for FY 2004-2005 are expected to go almost \$100,000 lower, despite an increase in the Town mil rate. State pay-

ments and grants have dropped from 40% of total revenue to only 35%, placing considerable strain on the municipal budget.

While Somers is one of the most profoundly affected communities, it is not alone with PILOT payments under-funded by over \$16 million statewide. Somers, together with other affected communities, should collectively petition the State to restore PILOT payments to their statutorily required levels.

### **Strategies to Encourage Appropriate Economic Development**

1. Seek to attract and encourage businesses that meet residents everyday needs.
2. Promote home-based businesses.
3. Expand the role of the Economic Development Commission to act as ambassadors to the business community.
4. Institute a Business Visitation Program with the Economic Development Commission to keep informed of businesses concerns and needs.
5. Encourage tourist-based businesses.
6. Investigate creating a system of “wayfinding” signs.
7. Promote revenue-positive, alternative housing such as age-restricted housing.
8. Pursue restoration of statutory PILOT payment funding levels.

### **Additional Strategies**

Chapter 5 contains additional alternative housing strategies that result in more tax revenue and less service demands than conventional single-family development, making them a form of economic development.

**A Historic Inn**



**An Attractive Local Business**



## Village District Myths

*Village district designation will prohibit changes that affect the historic integrity of a property: **False.*** Village districts are not local historic districts. Village districts often have architectural and site design standards intended to protect the character of the overall village but generally do not regulate many of the fine details that ensure historic accuracy and integrity.

*Village district designation will discourage any development or redevelopment of a property: **False.*** Village districts will simply provide architectural and design standards that will ensure that development is compatible with the village. Many developers and businesses appreciate clear standards that, if adhered to, will ensure an approval. However, corporate entities unwilling to modify the proposed design of their establishments to fit the character of the respective village could become discouraged.

*Village district designation can prevent the demolition of an historic structure: **False.*** A separately enacted Demolition Delay Ordinance can delay the demolition of an historic structure for up to 90 days in order to explore alternatives to demolition such as purchasing the property or relocating the structure. If an existing building fits the architectural standards of the district, a developer could still demolish the building but would be required to replace it with a building that also fits the architectural standards, creating an incentive to adaptively reuse the existing building rather than demolish it.

## Improve the Appearance of Business Development

When residents were asked to identify issues that were most important for addressing in this Plan, business development ranked as the number two issue. In discussing the issue further, many residents indicated that they were not as concerned over the benefits of economic development such as tax revenue and jobs, as they were over the appearance of commercial and industrial development in town. The telephone survey confirmed this finding with 72% of respondents agreeing that the Town could do a better job of controlling the design of commercial and industrial development.

### **Adopt Village Districts**

One area where the Zoning Commission can have a profound impact on the appearance of commercial development is in the villages of Somers and Somersville. Both villages have seen historic structures demolished or moved, only to be replaced by development that is out of character with the historic nature of the villages. The village of Somers has recently been witness to a controversial application where residents were concerned over the relocation of an historic building to accommodate new franchise architecture.

After defining the character of each village, the Zoning Commission can adopt separate and unique village districts with architectural and site design standards to ensure that new development reflects the most desirable attributes of each village. In doing so, Somers can welcome appropriate new business to either village (regardless of ownership) and be assured that the business will not detract from the character of the village or neighboring properties.

Given that village districts were studied in both Somers and Somersville but never implemented, the Zoning Commission should conduct a village district workshop to educate the public on their benefits, distinguish them from historic districts, and dispel any myths about them before attempting to adopt them.

### **Implement Design Review**

In recent years, much of the commercial development occurring around the country can be characterized as strip development, catering to motorists and their vehicles while industrial development often consists of utilitarian metal buildings, juxtaposed against residential areas or located at gateways into the community. This type of development can undermine the community character that residents value so highly.

For those commercial and industrial locations outside of the villages, such as the industrial areas along Field and Egypt Roads, village districts are not an option for controlling the appearance of development. Although lacking the power granted under a village district, a Design Review Committee can still help to improve the appearance of these outlying commercial areas.

Rather than adopt rigid zoning standards that must be adhered to, a Design Review Committee creates architectural and site design guidelines for businesses to

follow in developing their properties. The Design Review Committee reviews applications for conformance with their voluntary guidelines and makes non-binding recommendations to the Zoning Commission based on their findings. Many businesses appreciate the clear design direction provided by such guidelines, provided that compliance is not unreasonably costly.

While not bound by the design review process, existing businesses may be inspired to voluntarily make architectural and landscaping improvements to their properties, possibly triggering a commercial gentrification process throughout Somers.

### **Provide Tax Incentives for Improving Businesses Properties**

Once design guidelines are implemented, a sharp contrast between new and older commercial and industrial properties will become apparent. To facilitate the improvement of existing older properties, the Town can adopt an abatement program under Section 12-65 of the Connecticut General Statutes to abate the increase in assessment due to major improvements to buildings over a seven-year period. Criteria would have to be established to ensure the program's effectiveness such as: a minimum age of building, a minimum cost threshold, and design criteria such as adopted architectural design guidelines described above.

### **Improve Commercial and Industrial Development Standards**

Beyond the oftentimes-subjective nature of architectural design, there are more objective measures that the Zoning Commission can use to improve the quality and appearance of commercial and industrial development. The Zoning Commission should comprehensively review the Zoning Regulations to identify the standards that have allowed the type of development that residents are concerned with, and make modifications where necessary to ensure that future development is more compatible with the character of the community. Buffers, landscaping, lighting, parking, signage, and yards are all factors that can easily be modified to help mitigate the negative impacts of development. Specific recommendations for improving some of these standards can be found throughout this plan.

#### **Strategies to Improve the Appearance of Business Development**

1. Educate residents about the distinctions between “village districts” and “historic districts”.
2. Adopt separate “village districts” in the villages of Somers and Somersville to ensure that future development is compatible with the character of each village.
3. Create a Design Review Committee to adopt and administer development guidelines to help improve the appearance of commercial/industrial development outside of the villages.
4. Create a tax abatement/incentive program to encourage exterior improvements to commercial/industrial buildings.
5. Comprehensively review and modify the Zoning Regulations where necessary to ensure that future development is more compatible with the character of the community.

#### **Additional Strategies**

Chapter 3 contains strategies to protect historic resources that may also help to maintain the character of historic commercial areas.

Chapter 5 contains strategies designed to mitigate the impacts of parking lots that may also help to improve the appearance of business development.

Potential Uses for Somersville Mill	Agree
Offices	83%
Retail Stores	79%
Services	78%
Restaurants	76%
Housing	74%
Light Manufacturing	73%
Entertainment	61%
Lodging	59%

## Adaptively Reuse the Somersville Mill

The Somersville Manufacturing Company complex represents a significant piece of Somers overall economic development strategy. The location and character of the mill make it ideal for a number of alternative uses. The majority of residents surveyed agreed that the mill is suitable for a variety of uses ranging from 59% in favor of lodging up to 83% in favor of offices (see sidebar). With the exception of lodging uses, the Zoning Regulations permit all of the suggested uses.

The mill complex is particularly well suited to supporting two of the main economic development strategies: building upon the local tourist economy and growing the local economy from within. The location and character of the building makes it attractive as a tourist destination for antiques, gifts, art galleries and possibly dining. With minimal improvements, a portion of the complex could be used as an incubator for small businesses that have outgrown the home office or garage environment.

Because of its historic nature as part of a walking mill village, flexibility will be required to adaptively reuse the mill. Flexible parking, area, bulk and other standards will be needed to allow the owners to retrofit a property that is non-conforming in so many ways by today’s zoning standards. A new design development district could:

- allow the site to be comprehensively master planned for a variety of uses;
- establish reasonable standards that recognize the non-conforming nature of the property and eliminate the need for variances; and
- protect the architectural and historic character of the property in return for design flexibility.

The Water Pollution Control Authority’s (WPCA) treatment plant is sized for the industrial use of the mill but will need to be expanded if it is to accommodate more water intensive uses such as housing, retail, and restaurants. The WPCA is currently investigating expansion of their plant and according to the survey results, residents support their efforts.

### Additional Strategies

Chapter 3 contains strategies to protect historic resources that may also help efforts to redevelop the Somersville Manufacturing Co.

Chapter 5 contains additional strategies to expand the sewer system that will also support efforts to redevelop the Somersville Manufacturing Co.

**Somersville Mill Redevelopment Strategies**

1. Explore the possibility of allowing hospitality uses such as lodging or a conference center and amend the Zoning Regulations if uses are appropriate.
2. Consider a design development district for the Somersville Manufacturing Company site.
3. Expand the WPCA treatment plant to accommodate at least the redevelopment of the Somersville Manufacturing Company site.

## **Reinforce the Villages**

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Somers' villages have been the focus of community life for almost 300 years. Churches, civic functions, shops, and until recently, schools and factories were all located in the villages. Post World War II suburban expansion has shifted the focus away from the villages, with housing, industry and schools all becoming dispersed and automobile dependent.

### **Limit Commercial Sprawl**

By allowing traditional commercial uses such as retail, restaurants and personal services in the Industrial (I) Zone, Somers is inviting automobile oriented commercial sprawl to spread along Egypt Road and Field Road, further eroding the importance of its two villages. The Zoning Commission should restrict these uses to the Business (B) Zone located predominantly in or near the villages. In doing so, commercial activity will become focused in the villages, adding to their vitality and helping to restore their importance in daily life.

### **Encourage Housing In and Near Villages**

Housing is a critical element of a successful and vibrant village center. Residents living in or near villages are less dependent on automobiles, patronize village businesses, and contribute to the vitality and sense of place that makes villages attractive.

Somers currently allows age-restricted housing at a density of four units to the acre. Congregate and assisted living facilities, recommended in Chapter 5-Addressing Community Needs, require higher densities as well. These alternative types of housing should be focused in or near the villages not only because of their symbiotic relationship with businesses and other village functions but also because of the availability of public water and sewer needed to serve them. While this obstacle can be overcome by engineering community wells and septic systems, these solutions should not be used to allow these alternative housing options to locate in remote locations where older residents will be dependent on automobiles or paratransit options such as dial-a-ride to perform daily functions.

Mixed-use development is another way of adding to the vitality of a village. By allowing housing in combination with commercial businesses, business owners can live and work on the same premises or create rental opportunities within walking distance of village services. Somers residents were divided on this issue with 49% agreeing that Somers should encourage mixed-use development within the villages, such as apartments and offices over first floor retail stores.

### **Create Walkable Villages**

Enhancing pedestrian access throughout the villages of Somers and Somersville will add to community character and quality of life by reducing dependence on motor vehicles (traffic and parking) as well as promoting a healthier, more convenient environment for residents and visitors. Seventy percent of residents surveyed agreed that the Town should do more to create walkable villages.

### **Sidewalk Standards**

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Sidewalks in the villages should be provided on both sides of major streets and at least one side of all other streets. Five foot widths allow pedestrians to walk side by side and comfortably pass. Sidewalks should be either integrated into curbs or separated by several feet to accommodate an area large enough for grass to thrive.

Coordinated streetscape elements such as lighting, benches, trash receptacles, and tree grates, can create an attractive, comfortable pedestrian environment and add significantly to community character and sense of place.

Burial of overhead utilities in these areas can also greatly enhance the streetscape by eliminating overhead wires and allowing the unimpeded growth of street trees.

In order to create truly walkable villages, consider: sidewalks that are appropriately sized for their use, safe pedestrian street crossings, streetscape amenities such as shade trees, seating areas, and pedestrian scaled lighting, and even pedestrian oriented business signage such as on windows and awnings. Many of these improvements can be installed as improvements are made to Routes 190 and 83 or required as properties within the villages are redeveloped.

While the villages of Somers and Somersville both have sidewalks, they are narrow in places and do not serve the full extent of either village. Both villages could benefit from wider, more extensive sidewalk networks and other pedestrian safety enhancements to make them truly walkable villages.

### **Additional Strategies**

Chapter 3 contains strategies to protect historic resources that may also reinforce the character of the villages.

Chapter 5 contains alternative housing and pedestrian enhancement strategies that may also help reinforce the character of the villages.

### **Village Reinforcement Strategies**

1. Prohibit retail, restaurant, and personal service uses in the I-Zone to focus commercial activity in the villages.
2. Encourage age-restricted and other alternative housing in and near the villages.
3. Encourage appropriate mixed-use development in the Business District.
4. Create walkable villages through sidewalk, safety, and streetscape improvements.

**Somersville**



**Somers**



## Manage Residential Growth

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Around the country, people are realizing that traditional, inflexible large-lot zoning regulations have resulted in the systematic consumption of rural land into characterless subdivisions that has come to be known as “residential sprawl.”

While Chapter 3 – Protecting Important Resources contains many strategies to reduce the amount of raw land being consumed by residential development, increase the quality and quantity of preserved open space, and relate development potential to the ability of the land to support it; there are additional tools available that can be used to improve the pattern of future residential growth.

### Adopt a Soil-Based Residential Density Regulation

Soil-based zoning regulations cannot only be used to manage the amount of future residential growth but the pattern of development as well. Soil-based zoning (see Page 31) replaces minimum lot size and frontage requirements with soil-dependant density factors that limit the total number of houses in a development, making development patterns more flexible and eliminating uncertainty in the development potential of land (see sidebar).

Soil-based zoning would not apply to residential areas already served by public sewers since it is based on the ability of soils to support on-site septic systems. Soil-based zoning also would not render developed “A” and “A-1” residentially zoned properties non-conforming because it only applies to the development of vacant land.

Residents support this concept with 72% of those surveyed agreeing that residential subdivisions that preserve more public open space but keep the same number of houses are a good idea. Similarly, 53% of survey respondents agreed that residential subdivisions that reduce lot sizes to avoid environmentally sensitive areas, but keep the same number of houses, are a good idea.

### Encourage Open Space Development Patterns

When soil-based zoning regulations are used to specify the total number of housing units in a development, more attention can be given to overall development patterns. The problem with conventional zoning is that developers who try to fit as many housing units as possible on a property are forced by inflexible standards to consume all available land in an effort to maximize profits. The results are often open spaces that appear to be more of an afterthought and development patterns that do little for community character.

Under soil-based zoning, once the number of housing units is determined, there is no incentive to utilize the entire parcel. A developer is free to design the development in a more environmentally sensitive manner and maximize profits by reducing necessary public improvements.

To discourage the use of conventional development patterns in sensitive areas such as aquifers and watersheds, conventional subdivisions that maximize lot

*With 98% of the Town zoned for residential development, residential growth has the greatest potential to affect community character and quality of life for Somers residents.*

### Soil-Based vs. Conventional Zoning

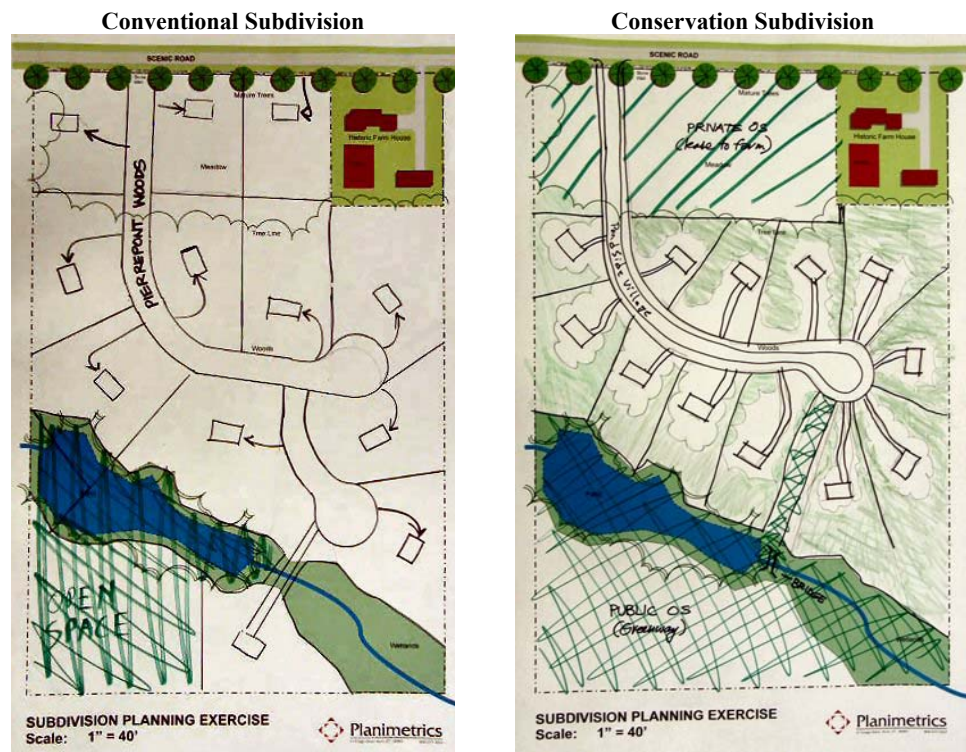
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The benefits of soil-based zoning over conventional lot-based zoning include:

- lot sizes can be reduced without increasing the number of housing units,
- the amount of infrastructure to be constructed and maintained can be reduced, thus reducing stormwater to be collected and treated;
- environmentally sensitive areas can be avoided and the impacts on larger sensitive areas such as aquifers and watersheds can be reduced;
- the amount of raw land consumed can be reduced as much as soil conditions will allow; and
- residents as well as wildlife are able to enjoy the benefits of the larger open spaces surrounding their homes.

sizes and minimize the open space set-aside could only be allowed by Special Use Permit while allowing lower impact conservation subdivisions by right.

The following figures were prepared by the Plan of Conservation and Development Steering Committee as part of an exercise to illustrate the benefits of conservation subdivisions. The conventional subdivision on the left destroyed a meadow and scenic road frontage; required an additional cul-de-sac and stream crossing; and set aside minimal open space in order to achieve 12 lots and maximize profits. In contrast, the conservation subdivision preserved most of the meadow and scenic road frontage; required less new road and no wetland crossing; and preserved more open space - all while achieving the same number of lots. The Steering Committee unanimously agreed that despite their smaller size, the conservation subdivision lots were superior because they all fronted on the cul-de-sac and more lots fronted on the pond, meadow and other open space.



### Additional Strategies

Chapter 3 contains strategies to preserve more open space, protect natural resources, and preserve scenic resources that may also help to improve the pattern of residential development.

Chapter 5 contains strategies designed to minimize the impacts of new public streets that may also improve the pattern of residential development.

### Residential Growth Management Strategies

1. Adopt a residential soil-based zoning regulation.
2. Require Special Use Permits for conventional subdivisions that maximize lot size (based on applicable density) while allowing conservation subdivisions by right.