

Climate Action Commission | (Smart Growth Land Use Strategies)

Basic overview (including current status)

Climate change will continue to have an impact on Vermont's economy, environment, and quality of life. Vermont's businesses, regional organizations, towns and state agencies recognize the need to plan for long-term solutions while preparing for and adapting to the immediate impacts of climate change. A key challenge is balancing the long-term priority of preparing for climate change with competing short-term issues and resource constraints. Continued support for Vermont's smart growth policies and planning elements along with strategic investment in land conservation will assist with climate adaptation.

Similarly, well planned growth adhering to smart growth principles helps to mitigate the impacts of climate change by reduction vehicle miles travel, creating efficiencies of scale, and creating opportunities for highly efficient district heating systems.

Future trends (without additional action):

Smart growth reduces climate change-related risks to people, buildings, infrastructure, clean water and Vermont's economy. From hazard mitigation and energy, to natural resource planning, Vermont's land use and development stakeholders are advancing climate change preparedness commensurate with the capacity available. Increased investment in planning for infrastructure in the right places can achieve a host of state and local smart growth goals related to climate change, such as: increasing housing and employment in our downtowns and village centers, preparing for severe weather, promoting energy efficiency, and revitalizing local economies.

Potential opportunities & challenges:

Smart Growth Opportunities

Compact, walkable development, a mix of uses, and clustered economic activity provide short- and long-term benefits that improve our communities in multiple ways, reduce emissions and make them more climate resilient. Co-benefits of smart growth include:

- Decreased pressure to build in our natural and working landscapes.
- More housing options for different life stages.
- Reduced long-term infrastructure maintenance costs.
- Increased active transportation (walking and biking), which promotes healthy lifestyles.
- Reduced single occupancy vehicle trips and related greenhouse gas emissions.
- Increased transportation options and transit feasibility.
- Cleaner water and air.
- Reduced energy consumption and expense.
- Progress in meeting Vermont's 50 x 50 goals in the State's Comprehensive Energy Plan.

Local Mitigation Opportunities

Severe weather costs Vermont cities and towns and its taxpayers. Communities want to know how climate change will affect their systems and citizens. Growing smart is about developing in appropriate places. Assessing community vulnerabilities posed by climate threats is the first step to determine which areas and assets are at risk. Local governments can use this information to prioritize actions in the three categories listed below.

Discourage new development in particularly vulnerable areas by:

- Adopting protective regulations for vulnerable areas – especially those prone to flooding and erosion.
- Participating in the state’s Emergency Relief and Assistance Fund (ERAF) program.
- Directing development away from particularly vulnerable areas within individual development sites.
- Adequately funding strategic land conservation efforts.

Protect people and assets in vulnerable areas by:

- Improving stormwater management approaches.
- Updating zoning and building codes to address flood risks.
- Creating local improvement districts to fund retrofits and upgrades for public buildings and infrastructure.
- Identifying and addressing local transportation system vulnerabilities.

Encourage sustainable growth in appropriate, low-risk areas by:

- Obtaining a state designated a downtown, village center, or neighborhood to support infill.
- Developing or updating a local Hazard Mitigation Plan.
- Enabling compact, mixed-use development with modernized bylaws.
- Removing procedural/permitting barriers to compact development.
- Adopting green infrastructure and complete streets design standards.
- Exploring options for transit, bike/ped and district heat infrastructure.

Regional Mitigation Opportunities

Regional approaches to land use planning for climate change can also help Vermont’s municipalities effectively address associated risks by exploring issues beyond town borders, coordinating actions, sharing data and information, and identifying best practices.

Regional approaches and their potential benefits include:

- Consolidating and distributing information and planning regionally for climate change can help ensure that land use plans protect particularly vulnerable areas and keep people and property safe.
- Making the transportation network more resilient by developing a regional, risk-based approach for prioritizing transportation investments.
- Implementing the tactical water basin plans to reduce stormwater runoff and flood potential.
- Implementing Vermont Conservation Design’s land protection priorities.

Challenges

- Decreased state funding and capacity to support in-depth community planning has made it increasingly difficult for municipalities to modernize their regulations.
- Many communities around the state do not have the necessary infrastructure (wastewater infrastructure in particular), to support compact development.
- Municipal officials, developers and the public lack awareness of the data, tools, regulations and outside support available to inform capital planning and land use decisions.

Technical potential - Not applicable.

Links for more information

- [Planning for Tomorrow’s Flood](#)
- [State Designation Programs](#)