

Transportation and Land Use Policy in Rhode Island

June, 2007

Rhode Island has strong local planning requirements and a state comprehensive plan that guides local communities towards sustainable development. The state's planning framework for coordinating transportation and land use is reinforced by access permitting and development review requirements as well as the empowerment of local governments to prevent development encroachment on planned state roadways.

The Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act

Comprehensive planning has been mandatory for cities and towns in Rhode Island since the 1998 adoption of the [Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act](#). Municipal plans must be crafted and implemented according to statutory standards and updated every five years. The state provides municipalities with financial assistance and [statewide data](#) and technical information for planning. Municipal plans are reviewed by the state to ensure that state goals and policies are reflected in the plans. In turn, state agency programs and projects must conform to state-approved municipal plans. Plan approval is a minimum requirement of some state programs and certain state benefits and incentives are conditioned upon state plan approval. If a city or town fails to submit a comprehensive plan or the plan is not approved by the state, the state may adopt a plan on behalf of the municipality. The city or town must then administer and enforce the state-adopted plan.

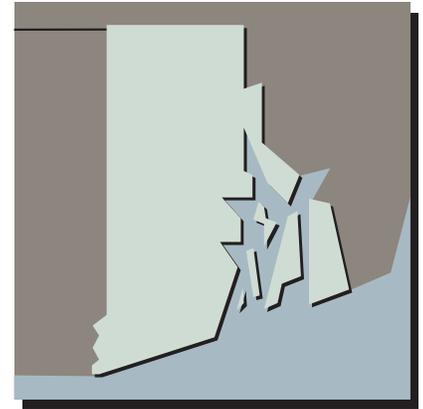
The state goals and policies used to review local comprehensive plans are expressed in the [State Guide Plan](#). The State Guide Plan is a strategic plan consisting of 21 separate agency plans, including the [state land use](#) and [transportation](#) plans. State Guide Plan goals for transportation and land use encourage compact and mixed-use development, transportation systems that shape and serve development in accordance with state land use policies, and the maintenance of the functional integrity of existing and planned roadways through appropriate land use controls and design standards. The [State Planning Council](#) guides the development of and approves the State Guide Plan.

Sustainable Growth

State transportation and land use coordination is also affected by [Executive Order 00-2](#) which created the [Growth Planning Council](#) in 2000. The Growth Planning Council was charged with assessing the impacts of current development patterns, [evaluating](#) the effect of state programs, policies and expenditures on sustainable development, recommending ways to encourage growth in economically and environmentally sound locations, and fostering state, local and private partnerships to promote sustainable growth. In 2002, the Growth Planning Council launched an [initiative](#) to promote growth centers. The Council suggested prioritizing state discretionary investments as well as technical assistance and expedited regulatory review to locally designated and state approved centers. In 2004, the State Guide Plan was revised to reflect this initiative, outlining the process and criteria for the establishment of growth centers.

Statewide Transportation Planning

Statewide transportation planning in Rhode Island is the responsibility of the State Planning Council. The State Planning Council is also the federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization for the entire state, charged with adopting a long-range transpor-



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tation plan ([Transportation 2025](#)) and an annual [Transportation Improvement Program](#). The Transportation Improvement Program is a project funding document that implements the strategies and projects contained in the long-range plan. While the State Planning Council creates the transportation plans, the Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT) implements them, with the exception of the statewide public transit system which is operated by the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority.

Transportation 2025 asserts that the state cannot build roads to address congestion without threatening the fabric and character of neighborhoods and villages. Instead, the plan advocates reducing demand, maintaining the existing system, and better managing the system for optimum performance. Transportation 2025 also emphasizes [travel corridor planning](#), which integrates state and local land use and transportation planning along highway corridors. The state's policy recommendations for travel corridors include:

- targeting transportation investments and other incentives to growth centers,
- providing information and technical training to local governments to update the land use and transportation elements of their plans and regulations,
- working with cities and towns to control land development along arterial highways to preserve their function, capacity, safety and appearance,
- educating the public concerning the benefits of more concentrated development,
- developing criteria to measure municipal performance on developing a balanced transportation system and offering incentives to communities who demonstrate a commitment and progress towards increasing their system's modal balance,
- using access management to improve traffic flow and safety, and
- requiring developers to pay for highway improvements where increased traffic from new development degrades traffic flow or intersection level of service.

Access Control and Development Review

In addition to implementing Transportation 2025, RIDOT is [legislatively authorized](#) to regulate access to state roads. A physical alteration permit is required for development on or adjacent to state highways. Permits are also required for properties with existing access if the land use of the property changes or the traffic generated by the site increases. Traffic impact studies are required for developments that generate 100 or more new vehicle trips and for developments proposed in areas already suffering congestion. Mitigation is only required for non-residential development. Conditions for approval and details of the approval process are explained in RIDOT's [Physical Alteration Permit Manual](#).

Another tool RIDOT has for addressing development impacts is the ability to review and comment on major land development and subdivision master plans under the [Land Development and Subdivision Review Enabling Act](#) of 1992. While the state cannot request congestion mitigation under these statutes, local governments can under certain circumstances. The need for the mitigation must be clearly documented in local comprehensive plans, the formulas for calculating payment must be established in local regulations, the negative impacts of the proposed development must be clearly documented, and the mitigation required must be related to the significance of the identified impact.

Protection of Right-of-Way for Planned State Roadways

Finally, Rhode Island law provides for the prevention of development encroachment on planned state roadways. The [mapped streets statute](#) enables cities and towns to adopt official maps showing the locations of streets, existing and planned, for the purpose of regulating development that might encroach upon street beds. Municipalities are authorized to deny development within mapped street beds, except under very limited circumstances. Additionally, cities and towns are empowered to deny development that does not abut a street on the official map that has been certified to be suitably improved, unless suitable improvements have been assured by means of a performance guarantee.

For More Information

For more information about state transportation and land use policy, contact the WSDOT Transportation Planning Office:

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