

Groton 2035: Building a Greater Groton

Summary of Topic Content plus Policies and Strategies

Chapter 3: A Place Where We Grow Responsibly to Meet Our Needs

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Chapter 3: A Place Where We Grow Responsibly to Meet Our Needs

Goal Statement

Promote sustainable land use and economic development that strengthens Groton's tax base, supports local businesses, and enhances community character. The Town will encourage the redevelopment of underutilized and derelict commercial areas, foster mixed-use, infill development, and a variety of housing in appropriate locations, and support innovation, clean industries, and job growth — balancing economic opportunity with environmental stewardship and quality of life.

Land Use

Key Points

Taken together, all of the topics in the POCD help the Town make decisions about land use. The goals for transportation, economic development, the environment, and more shape how land should be used in the future.

- The crux of any POCD is to **balance the needs for conservation and development**, and Groton continues to work towards finding solutions for how these important elements can work together, and complement each other, to accomplish Town goals.
- Groton has a **longstanding commitment to smart growth and sustainable development**, and that commitment continues in Groton 2035. In practice, this means:
 - Encouraging development and redevelopment in areas with existing development, infrastructure, and transportation options.
 - Minimizing development and encouraging conservation in remaining greenfield areas lacking in infrastructure as well as in floodplains and other hazard zones.
 - Improving walkability and bikeability.
 - Encouraging mixed use in key areas.
 - Encouraging a diversity of housing choices.

Turn the above text into a graphic demonstrating what smart growth is.

- The 2016 POCD addressed this issue through the concept of “nodes” and special focus areas where denser, mixed-use development was to be encouraged. Since then, **the Town has completed a full rewrite of its zoning**, which now allows a variety of mixed-use at different scales to accommodate smart growth development. This most notably occurred in new zoning districts such as the Mixed-Use Town Center (MTC), Mixed-Use Village Center (MVC), Mystic Downtown District (MDD), and Nautilus Memorial Design District (NMDD) Overlay.
- While these updates to the Town's **zoning regulations** have been a very positive step, in and of themselves they are **not necessarily giving the community the types of development it wants and needs**. Most notably, housing needs are not being met (*see the Housing section in Chapter 1*) and many commercial properties remain in need of redevelopment and are not attractive to the types of shops, restaurants, and services desired by residents.
- Zoning sets the stage for what is possible on a property and can incentivize certain uses to an extent, so the Town will continue to explore additional zoning amendments as needed, particularly around increasing housing diversity. However, zoning on its own may not be enough

to spur development or redevelopment. Other tools can be leveraged to make private development and redevelopment more attractive. The Town must **continue to explore incentives, public investments in the public realm and rights-of-way, and public-private partnerships** to encourage private investment in desired land uses over time (*see the Economic Development section of this Chapter*). While the Town cannot control what private property owners choose to do, it can do things to make the desired outcomes easier, more affordable, and more attractive to property owners.

- It will be important to establish **performance standards** to determine which lands should be prioritized for conservation and which are appropriate for development and redevelopment – and make sure zoning and land conservation policies are changed accordingly as needed. Furthermore, it will be important to continue to explore how land can be utilized to accomplish both goals together, such as utilizing development to help subsidize the cost of preservation and maintenance of green space
- **Excess Town-owned property** puts Groton in the driver’s seat and provides opportunities for the Town to identify their preferred public benefits for a site and enter a public-private partnership with a development team to deliver projects that help accomplish Town goals, benefit the community, and that are financially feasible. It is important for the Town to continue refining its Town-Owned Property Disposition process and how it identifies the preferred uses for each parcel. It is also important to note that identifying desired uses for a parcel must be based on site considerations such as zoning, parcel constraints, and financial viability. Municipally-owned land should and will be maintained for existing Town services and facilities, like Town Hall, schools, libraries, Thrive 55+, public parks, and others. Excess Town-owned property that has access to public water and sewer and/or is located near shops, parks, Town services, and other amenities could be prioritized for development, including much needed housing and/or recreational uses. Excess Town-owned property that is adjacent to other conserved lands or protect the drinking water supply could be prioritized for preservation or conservation.

What We Have Heard

As noted above, almost every topic in Groton 2035 has implications for land use and development. What we heard related to land use was often presented in the context of another topic such as housing or the environment.

- People are **concerned about the cost and availability of housing**, which is increasingly out of reach for many residents.
- People are **concerned about protecting the environment**. Groton is special in part because it encompasses urban, suburban, and rural development along with significant swaths of forest, water bodies, coastal areas, and other natural spaces. People want to make sure the Town maintains healthy natural spaces that are accessible to the public.
- People are **concerned about the quality of the Town’s commercial corridors**. Many people feel these areas are unattractive and are not providing the shops and services they desire. Others dislike how auto-oriented these areas are, and envision a future where Groton has a true, walkable Town center on a larger scale than the historic precedents in downtown Mystic and Noank village.
- It is also important to acknowledge that we heard a lot of **concerns related to growth and new development generally** – many people do not want to see additional change and growth in the community. While this is a common sentiment across much of Connecticut and New England, change is inevitable. All communities evolve over time, especially if they wish to accomplish

many of the desires that were articulated, such as a walkable Town center with a thriving business and services environment, and certain types of retail. The Town remains committed to proactively and responsibly managing evolving land uses in Groton.

Our Current Work

Below are some of the things the Town is already doing or will continue to do throughout the ten-year period of this plan related to Land use, as well as objectives identified in the 2016 POCD that the Town has been implementing and will continue to implement.

- Focus infrastructure improvements, including water and sewer capacity, sidewalks, trails, and parks, in and within walking distance of the MTC, MVC, MDD, CN/NMDD, and CR zoning districts to support development potential as well as quality of life amenities. Partner with the Connecticut Municipal Development Authority (CMDA), which supports municipalities across the State in their efforts to build more housing in their downtowns (*see call-out box below*).
- Prioritize locations for new or expanded civic uses within walking distance of existing uses such as Town Hall, the Groton Community Center, Groton Public Library, Thrive 55+, Grasso Gardens, and public parks.
- Prioritize further investments in sidewalks, trails, pedestrian safety measures, etc. that help connect civic uses with each other and with surrounding neighborhoods, parks, and conservation lands.
- Prioritize investing in development and infrastructure outside of hazard zones. In hazard zones, consider climate change when making infrastructure investments, emergency plans, and procedures.
- Maintain the sewer avoidance areas generally located north of I-95 in order to discourage larger scale development in these areas.

What is the CMDA program?

The Connecticut Municipal Development Authority (CMDA) is a quasi-public State entity that partners with municipalities to help grow their downtowns by expanding housing opportunities around transit hubs. It does not override local zoning. Groton's Route 1/Downtown area is a strong candidate for the CMDA program and could benefit from a focused housing plan and potential funding to support further activation, housing development, transportation infrastructure, and transit. Additionally, the Downtown area is an already established Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District and allows high density transit supportive development through the Mixed-Use Town Center zoning, which would be a valuable overlay to the tools and incentives the CMDA can provide, helping to spearhead activation in the Downtown core.

Maps

1. Current Zoning Map
2. Existing Land Use Map
3. Map of "Downtown" area (i.e. Mixed-Use Town Center – MTC – zoning district)

Graphics

Include several photos highlighting a variety of land uses in Groton. Examples may include downtown Mystic, a standard residential subdivision, strip shopping center, park or open space, industrial use or the airport, etc.

Policies & Strategies

Policy 3.1 Revitalize the Downtown Corridor to create a walkable area that includes new housing opportunities and public spaces.

Strategy 3.1.a Develop a master plan for downtown Groton (roughly corresponding to the MTC zoning district) that visualizes viable redevelopment scenarios possible under existing or refined zoning. Highlight opportunities to bring buildings closer to streets, move parking lots to the rear, and incorporate housing above and behind commercial uses. As needed, propose amendments to the MTC zoning district and other neighboring properties as necessary, to better realize the vision of the master plan.

Strategy 3.1.b Promote public and public/private investments to develop a more attractive and walkable public realm.

Policy 3.2 Plan to redevelop institutional and excess Town-owned properties that no longer serve the community to incorporate a balance of the wants and needs of surrounding neighborhoods and the Town as a whole in a financially feasible way.

Strategy 3.2.a Improve the Town-Owned Property Disposition Process to include a redevelopment feasibility analysis and community engagement component in the Property Review portion of the process, to help inform the Town Council's identification of the preferred public benefits. This process will identify a balance of the community wants and needs with the realities of each parcel such as unique site constraints or opportunities, and financial feasibility, and provide for a more consistent disposition process.

Strategy 3.2.b Develop a holistic, proactive master plan for all excess Town-owned properties that have significant potential for redevelopment (whether for housing, mixed-use, recreation, or a combination). As part of this process, conduct robust community outreach to both the neighborhoods surrounding these properties and the Town as a whole. Set redevelopment goals for each property that balance local desires with Town-wide needs and consider the cumulative impacts of redevelopment at all the sites.

Strategy 3.2.c Coordinate with the State as the owner of the Mystic Education Center, to help shape their plans for redevelopment to be compatible with the Town's vision for the site. Develop a master plan for the property and conduct a feasibility analysis, in partnership with the State, similar to the process for excess town-owned properties.

Policy 3.3 Encourage development in areas served by public utilities.

Strategy 3.3.a Use zoning tools to optimize development where it can be supported and discourage it where it cannot (including the Sewer Avoidance Area). Strategically expand sewer service to key nodes in order to promote more compact development and less sprawl.

How are the new uses for Excess Town-Owned Properties determined?

Throughout the development of this Plan, the Town has heard a great deal from members of the public on the future of the SB Butler Campus, in particular, and other properties such as the Mystic Education Center. *It is important to note that Groton 2035 will not be setting a definitive future land use agenda for these properties.* As reflected in the strategies above, the Town is committed to improving and refining the existing Town Owned Property Disposition process for these decisions including adding feasibility analysis and additional community engagement components. Additionally, it's important to note that the Town does not own the Mystic Education Center, and therefore does not control or determine its use in the same way as excess Town-Owned properties.

What is Institutional Reuse?

Throughout Groton, there are many institutional uses such as churches, nursing homes, private schools, etc. When these uses close, it can be a challenge to adapt them for other uses, particularly where they exist in residential zoning districts that only allow a limited number of uses beyond one- or two-unit dwellings. It will be important for the Town to continue to refine its policies around institutional reuse, setting standards for such properties to be redeveloped in a way that is compatible with other surrounding uses.

Spotlight on Resiliency

- **Sea levels are rising and storms are becoming more frequent.** Groton must protect itself by limiting development in hazardous (or soon to become hazardous) areas, including flood zones (especially coastal flood zones).
- **Smart growth principles support sustainability and resilience** by protecting water quality, habitat, and other natural resources, as well as reducing vehicle miles traveled which helps improve air quality.
- A **resilience hub** is a community-serving facility designed to enhance a community's ability to withstand and recover from various hazards, including natural disasters and climate change impacts. These hubs act as multi-functional centers that provide resources, services, and information to residents before, during, and after disruptive events.

Economic Development

Key Points

- **A Changing Economic Landscape** - Groton's economy remains anchored by defense and pharmaceuticals, with Electric Boat, Pfizer, and the U.S. Navy as dominant employers. These industries provide financial stability and high wages, but the Town's overreliance on a few major players increases exposure to industry-specific downturns and federal budget shifts. Diversifying the economic base continues to be a strategic imperative.
- **Workforce-Housing Imbalance** - Groton is a net importer of labor, with 82% of its workforce commuting in. While this reflects a strong employment base, it also highlights a shortage of housing for workers, particularly young professionals, families, and middle-income earners, that meet their needs and are affordable for their incomes. This dynamic reduces local spending, weakens community ties, contributes to traffic and carbon emissions, and limits economic resilience.
- **Revitalization of Key Corridors** - Much of Groton's retail and office space, especially along Routes 1 and 12, is outdated, underutilized, and auto-oriented. A 23.5% office vacancy rate (per data from CoStar) underscores the need for adaptive reuse and reinvention of these areas. The Town can develop strategies to encourage investments within the key nodes, particularly Downtown Groton, for new construction and for reuse, redevelopment, or repurposing of existing properties and strip commercial developments into walkable, pedestrian-friendly, and mixed-use areas. These areas also have potential for transit-oriented development (or TOD, which simply means collocating transit investments with greater density of housing and commercial uses) linked to future transportation enhancements.
- **Industrial Capacity and Infrastructure Gaps** - With an industrial vacancy rate under 1% (per data from CoStar), Groton's industrial sector is strong but space-constrained. Additional infrastructure investments will be necessary to unlock further growth. The Town should collaborate with Groton-New London Airport and local utility suppliers to complete necessary infrastructure improvements, such as utilities on South Road and changes to railroad underpasses. Coordination with Providence & Worcester Railroad can also help determine upgrades, needs, and growth plans for the freight line.
- **Tourism, Marine Economy, and Coastal Assets** - Groton's coastal character is a key asset. There is opportunity to expand marine-related economic activity and regional tourism. However, without a solution for transit and parking, attracting more tourists may not be sustainable. The Town can work to align regional and local tourism with economic development opportunities through physical improvements such as the Thames River Heritage Park, along with local services, and improved transit and parking solutions. A coordinated plan could also help support the economic viability of local marine industries, including sport fishing, recreational boating, shell fishing, aquaculture, and associated land-based commercial, industrial, and educational uses. Additional coordination with the Greater Mystic Chamber of Commerce and the Town of Stonington on shared tourism and transportation strategies for Mystic can enhance regional visitor experience and business viability.

- **Downtown Mystic is an Economic Driver Threatened by Climate Change** – Nearly all of the mixed use commercial area in downtown Mystic is subject to flooding by coastal storms. Most structures are located in the 1 percent or .2 percent flood zone. Substantial improvements are subject to the Town’s Flood Protection Regulations which requires floodproofing the structure. Often that means that the structure must be raised well above the height of its neighboring buildings, changing the historic rhythm of the streetscape.

What We Have Heard

- Across focus groups, public workshops, and staff interviews, **participants consistently highlighted economic diversification, workforce housing, and downtown reinvestment as key needs**. Public comments from the Virtual and In-Person Open Houses noted dissatisfaction with the look and feel of commercial corridors, especially Routes 1 and 12, and called for revitalization with walkable, mixed-use development. Survey respondents shared that Route 1 in particular feels disconnected from the community, dominated by car-oriented uses, and aesthetically unappealing. Vacant storefronts and outdated buildings contributed to a sense of economic stagnation.
- There was also strong interest in **attracting a broader mix of businesses**, especially “experiential” businesses such as small local retailers, restaurants, fitness studios, and family-friendly venues. Many participants requested more entertainment and gathering spaces. Respondents emphasized convenience and the role of corridors like Route 1 in supporting everyday needs but felt that the corridors currently fall short of their potential.
- Some stakeholders noted that **many higher-paying jobs at Electric Boat are filled by commuters** due to the limited housing supply and high cost of living, and that this dynamic weakens Groton’s long-term economic sustainability. Others identified the need to better leverage coastal and tourism assets year-round to support small businesses and cultural destinations.
- The Town’s planning tools—such as **TIF districts and Enterprise Zones—have yet to fully deliver on their potential**, and some see an opportunity for Groton to do more proactive small business outreach and marketing and increase support programs. Stakeholders also emphasized the importance of addressing infrastructure gaps to unlock future industrial and commercial development.

Our Current Work

Below are some of the things the Town is already doing or will continue to do throughout the ten-year period of this plan related to Economic Development, including objectives identified in the 2016 POCD and other guiding plans such as the 2019 Economic Development Strategy.

- Support attraction and retention of businesses in emerging sectors such as blue technology, life sciences, and advanced manufacturing, through coordination with state and regional partners and marketing of sites.
- Provide resource navigation and site readiness support for entrepreneurs and growth-stage firms.
- Market Groton’s assets for business relocation or expansion.

- Promote zoning updates to encourage diverse housing types near employment centers. *See the Land Use section in this chapter and the Housing section in Chapter 1 for more information.*
- Integrate housing into economic development planning and incentives.
- Support development of mixed-use areas that include attainable housing options.
- Consider TOD opportunities tied to future rail service in Downtown Groton.
- Coordinate with the Mystic Cooperative Task Group and Town of Stonington on shared strategies for greater Mystic, such as transportation and parking.
- Include businesses and economic interests in climate change initiatives, and consider climate change and hazards in economic development planning.
 - Help local businesses become more resilient. The Town will support businesses with continuity of operations planning, floodproofing, and other resilience planning and actions. This is especially important in downtown Mystic.
 - Assist water-dependent businesses with planning for sea level rise and the impacts of climate change.
- Support the Economic Development Commission (EDC) in its mission to build relationships with local businesses, promote opportunities, receive feedback, and identify needs of the business community.
- Administratively support the Town Owned Property Disposition process and ways for projects to accomplish multiple Town goals, such as housing and publicly accessible park space.

Maps

- Show locations of major employers (EB, Pfizer, Navy) and other employment nodes – airport area, etc.; could also include retail areas
- Map of TIF districts and enterprise zones

Graphics

- Diagram to emphasize the commuter inflow/outflow dynamic
- Chart or visual emphasizing the high share of local businesses in Groton

Policies & Strategies

Policy 3.4 Promote economic resilience by expanding and diversifying Groton’s economic base beyond its major employers.

Strategy 3.4.a Expand outreach and technical assistance to small businesses.

Strategy 3.4.b Prioritize infrastructure investments to encourage development at strategic sites that supports the local and regional economy. Seek State and Federal funding to cover the majority of related expenses.

Policy 3.5 Promote the revitalization of commercially zoned corridors along Route 1, Route 12, and Route 184 to improve walkability to residential areas and to limit negative impacts of commercial development on residential neighborhoods.

Strategy 3.5.a Complete corridor-specific redevelopment plans for key areas along Route 1, Route 12 and Route 184 with market feasibility, design guidance, and infrastructure needs, including how to

potentially fund and maintain public improvements. This may be in partnership with CMDA and other applicable organizations.

Spotlight on Resiliency

- Economic development strategies focused on resiliency are an important part of preparing for climate change, as hazards are threats to local businesses and the economy as a whole, and therefore are a focus of the Town's Economic Development efforts.