

2026
Rural Policy Plan

Developed by the Massachusetts Rural Policy Advisory Commission

MASSACHUSETTS
RURAL POLICY
ADVISORY COMMISSION

Cover image: The village of Shelburne Falls.

FROM THE MASSACHUSETTS RURAL POLICY ADVISORY COMMISSION

The Rural Policy Advisory Commission (RPAC) welcomes readers to the 2026 Rural Policy Plan, a shared agenda for strengthening rural communities and ensuring that their needs and opportunities are reflected in decisions across the Commonwealth.

Established by the Massachusetts Legislature in 2015, RPAC is a statewide advisory body focused on the unique assets, challenges, and needs of the Commonwealth's rural communities. The Commission is charged with serving as a research and policy forum on issues critical to the welfare and vitality of rural municipalities and residents, from infrastructure and housing to economic development, natural resources, and public services.

Acting in an advisory capacity to the Governor and the Legislature, RPAC studies, reviews, and reports on the status of rural communities and evaluates how existing and proposed state laws, regulations, and programs affect them. The Commission advances legislative and policy solutions that address rural needs, advocates for rural areas to receive a fair share of state investment, and promotes collaboration among rural municipalities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery.

The pages that follow offer both context and a path forward: a portrait of rural Massachusetts, a look at progress since the first Rural Policy Plan in 2019, and recommendations for the work ahead. Across topics such as housing, education, economic development, transportation, public health, and municipal sustainability, the plan considers how state policy can better respond to rural circumstances and help communities turn shared priorities into action. These topics are closely connected, and progress in one area can create opportunities in others.

RPAC invites policymakers, local officials, regional partners, community organizations, and residents to use this plan as a resource for collaboration and action. Whether readers are seeking solutions to a particular challenge or considering the broader future of rural Massachusetts, the plan offers a starting point for working together toward stronger, more resilient communities.

Linda Dunlavy
Chair, Rural Policy Advisory Commission



MASSACHUSETTS
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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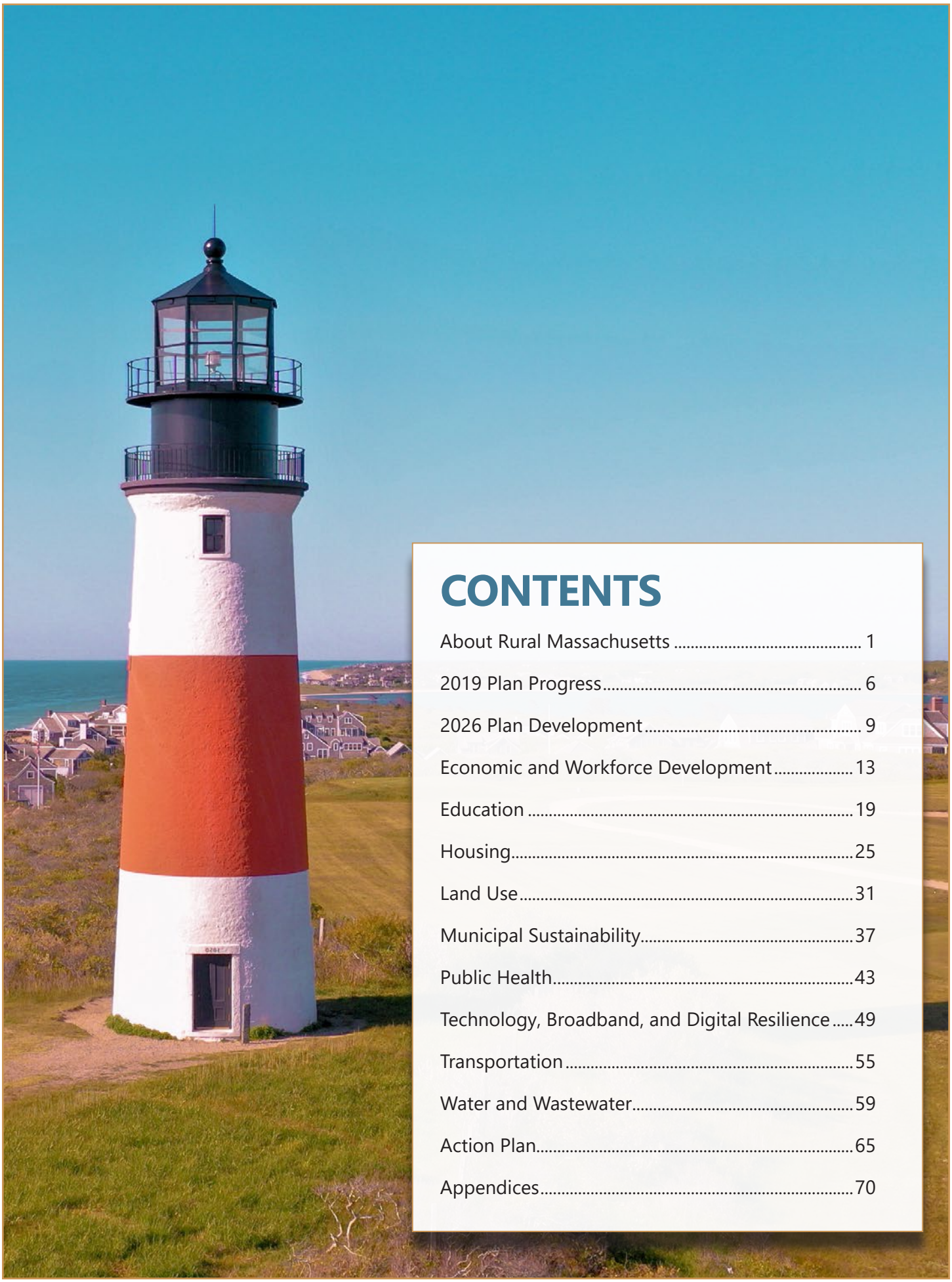
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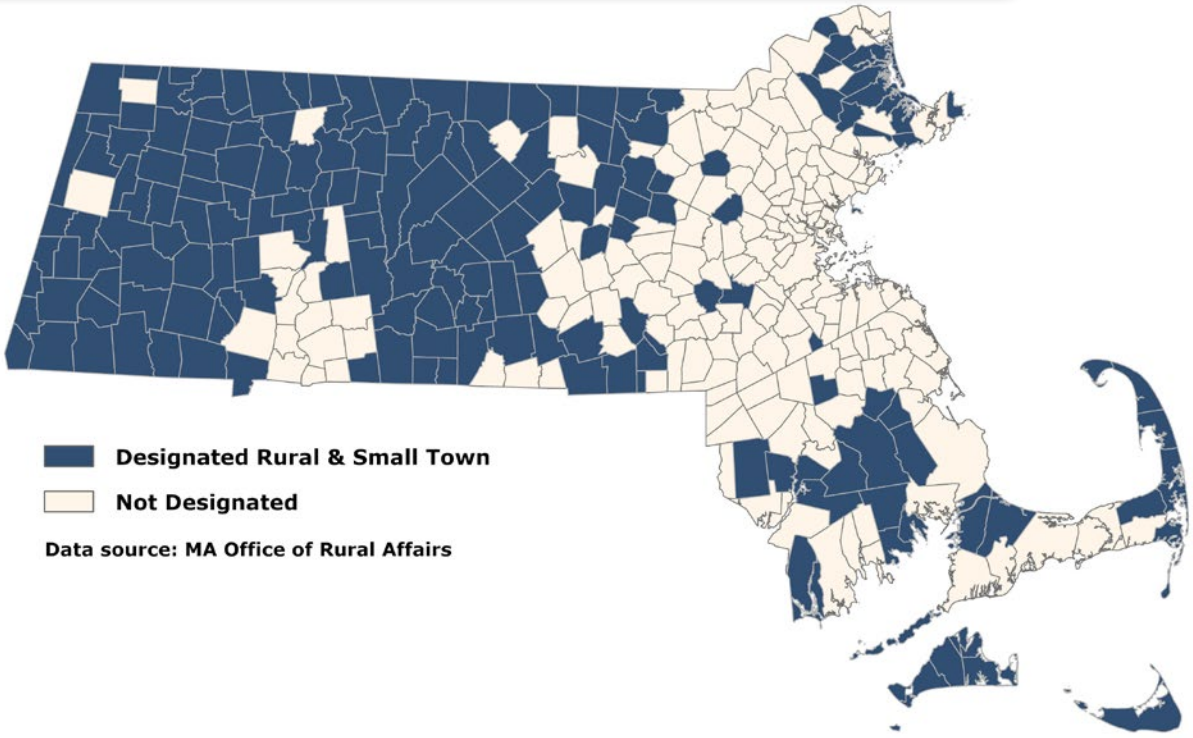
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A lighthouse on Nantucket.

ABOUT RURAL MASSACHUSETTS



ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS IN RURAL MASSACHUSETTS

The legislation that created the RPAC defines rural as municipalities with a population density of less than 500 people per square mile and/or municipalities with a population of less than 7,000 people. Based on the 2020 U.S. Census, there are 181 rural municipalities in Massachusetts encompassing 60% of the state's total land area and 13% of its total population.

Overall, rural areas in Massachusetts are growing more slowly than the state as a whole, and several rural municipalities in western Massachusetts are losing population. Municipalities shown in dark blue on Figure 1 to the right experienced population decline between 2015 and 2024.

Prior to COVID, the Cape and Islands were also expected to experience a decline in population. It is assumed that COVID relocations and retirements changed this expectation. That assumption is reinforced when looking at median age. Figure 2 compares median age of the three most rural counties in the Commonwealth – Barnstable, Berkshire and Franklin – to the three most urban counties – Middlesex, Norfolk and Suffolk – in 2024.

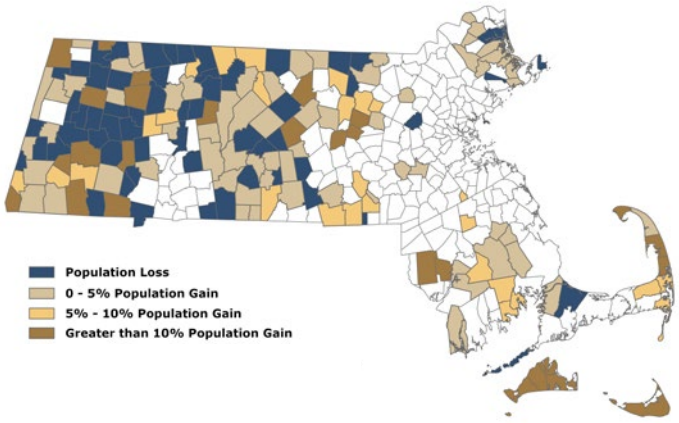


Figure 1. Population change in rural designated communities 2015-2024. Data source: US Census Bureau's 2015 and 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates.

The Commonwealth's most rural counties have the highest median age. The Commonwealth's most urban counties have the lowest median age. Cape Cod (Barnstable County) has a median age of 56 indicating that there are many retirees and elder citizens living on the Cape. Berkshire and Franklin Counties both have a median age of 47. In the immediate Boston vicinity (Suffolk County) the median age is 34 and is the Commonwealth's youngest county.

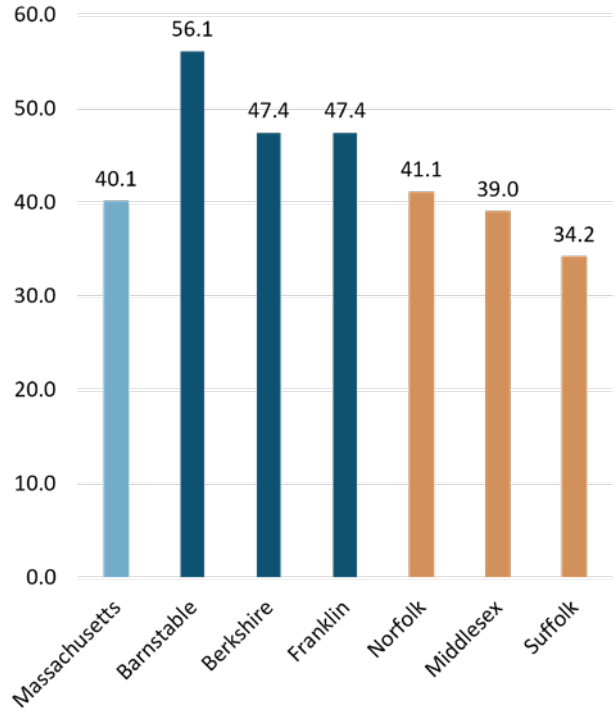


Figure 2. 2024 median age in sample counties.
Data source: US Census Bureau, 2024 ACS 1-year estimates.

Projections through 2050 anticipate that rural Massachusetts will continue to grow older at a more rapid pace than non-rural Massachusetts.

Not surprisingly, as the median age in Massachusetts counties rises, Kindergarten through Grade 12 public school enrollment declines. In Figure 3, Massachusetts overall (the light blue bar) has experienced just over a 2% decline in school enrollment between 2015 and 2024. Suffolk County is the only county on this chart that has experienced an increase in school enrollment.

Decline in school enrollment has been much more significant in the three most rural counties in the last 10 years and, it is important to note, these counties experienced a similar rate of enrollment decline in the preceding 10 years.

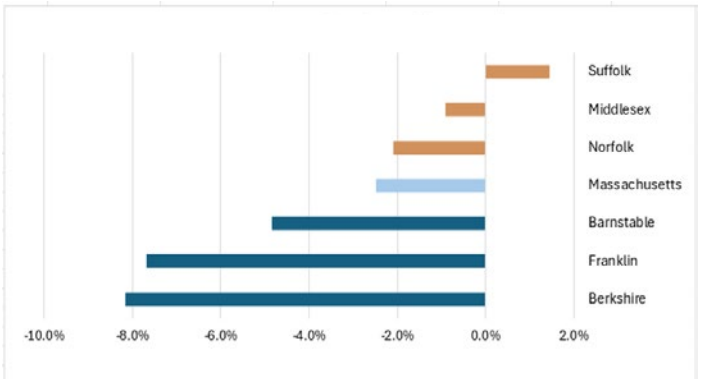


Figure 3. 2015-2024 school enrollment change.
Data source: US Census Bureau, 2015 and 2024 ACS 1-year estimates.

Figure 4 shows that the Massachusetts median income in 2024 was just over $100,000/year—and much higher in urban counties surrounding Boston. Conversely, median incomes are much lower in Berkshire and Franklin Counties. Note that the Franklin County median income (the bottom blue bar) is approximately half the median income of Norfolk County (the top gold bar).

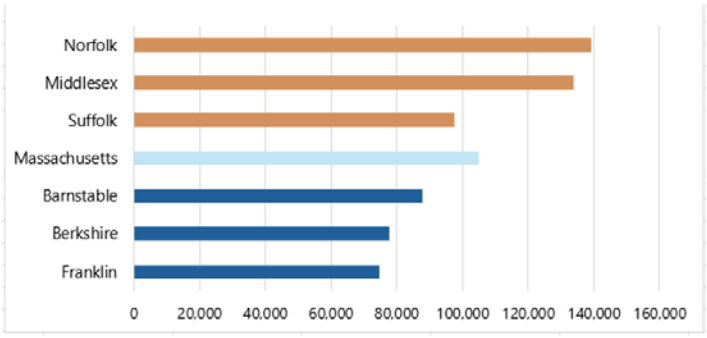


Figure 4. 2024 median household income.
Data source: US Census Bureau, 2024 ACS 1-year estimates.

Median income assesses the income of households based on where they are located in Massachusetts, not where the occupants work. Average annual pay assesses wages for jobs located within a county. Looking at average annual pay by county shows an even starker contrast between rural and non-rural Massachusetts. Jobs in Franklin County have the lowest average wages in the state at less than $60,000/year while average wages for jobs in Middlesex County are almost double that. While housing prices are lower in western Massachusetts than eastern Massachusetts, the housing price difference between rural and non-rural areas of the state has been shrinking since COVID and most other living costs are the same or similar.

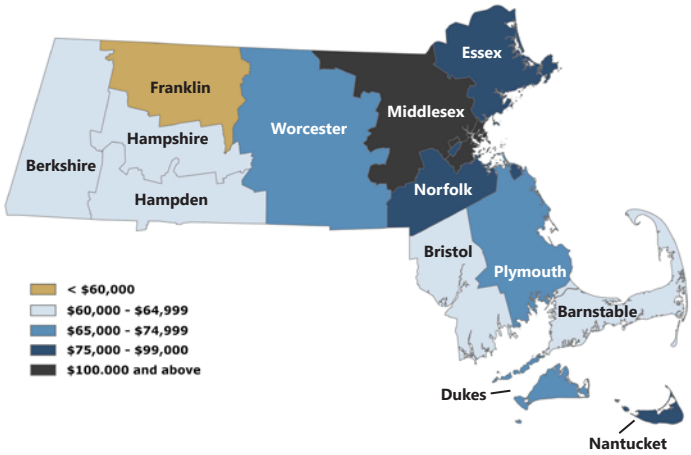


Figure 5. Average annual pay.
Data source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024 Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages.

An illustrative and perhaps unexpected example of this comes from the Housing and Transportation Index that was developed by the Center for Neighborhood Technology. The index is a national tool that measures the cost of housing and transportation for a family of median income by community. Because incomes are lower in our most rural counties, and transit options are fewer (and thus require that most households have one or more vehicles), the combined proportional cost of housing and transportation in rural Massachusetts is higher than the cost in urban Massachusetts, despite typically higher housing prices surrounding Boston.

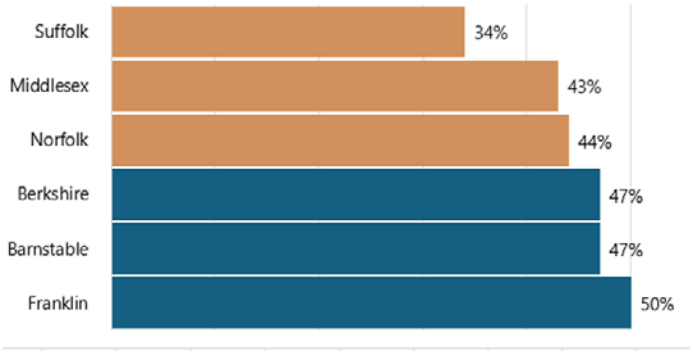


Figure 6. Housing and transportation as percentage of income.
Data source: CNT's Housing + Transportation Affordability Index.

These trends show that many rural communities face compounding demographic and economic challenges: an aging population, declining school enrollment, slower or negative population growth, lower household incomes and wages, and transportation-related costs that can offset the relative affordability of housing. These conditions affect the ability of municipalities to sustain public services, maintain a strong local workforce, support businesses, and attract and retain young people and families. Addressing them will require policies that recognize the distinct circumstances of rural Massachusetts and strengthen the long-term economic vitality, affordability, and livability of its communities.

THREE RURAL MASSACHUSETTS TYPOLOGIES

Rural Massachusetts is not a singular kind of place. From long-commute exurban towns in the I-495 belt, to remote hilltowns in the western counties and second-home destinations on the Cape and Islands, rural communities experience distinct combinations of opportunity and strain. To reflect this diversity and target strategies more precisely, the 2019 Rural Policy Plan organized rural municipalities into three broad

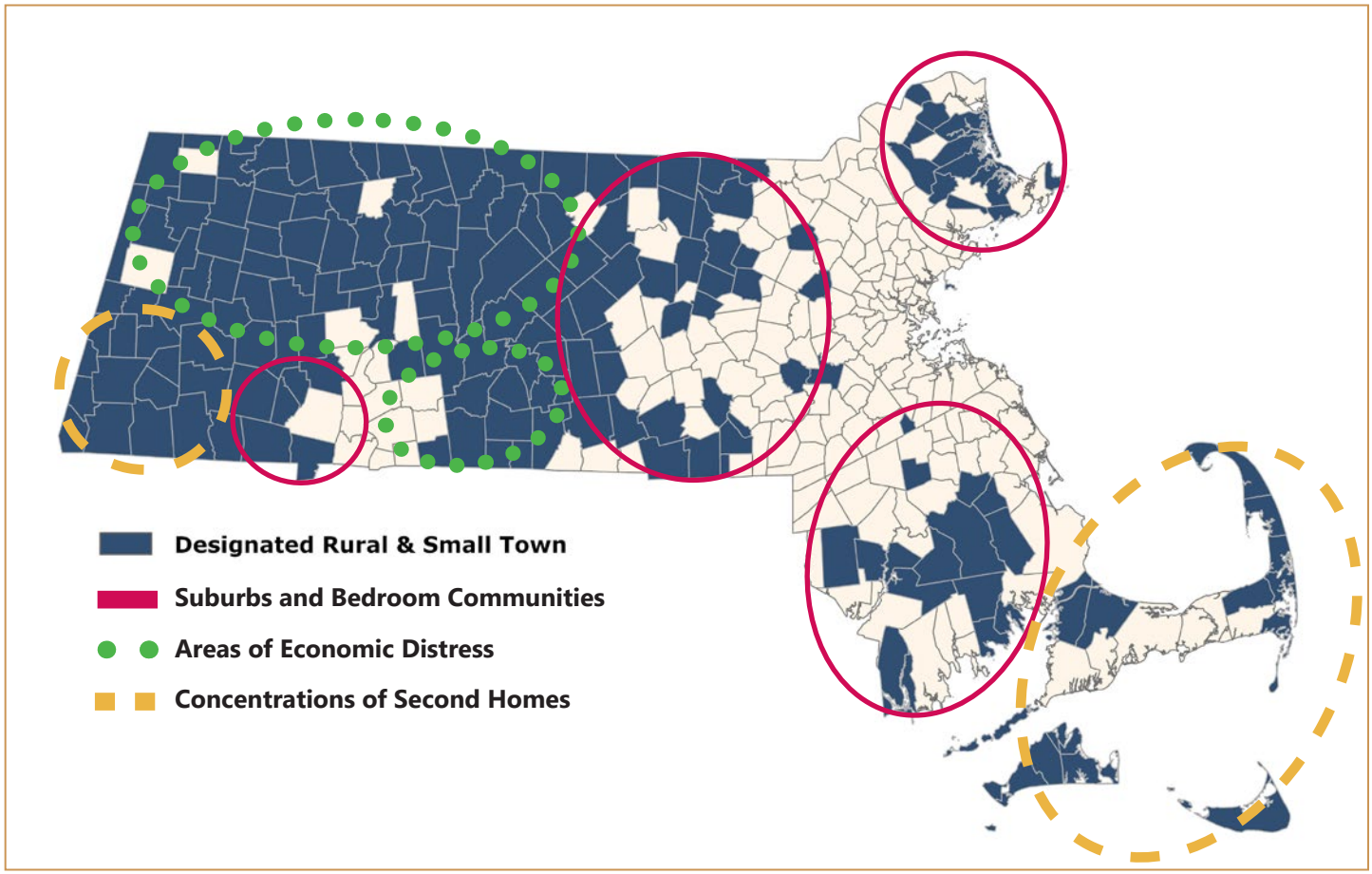


Figure 7. Massachusetts rural typologies used by the RPAC.

typologies that remain useful in this update: **Suburbs and Bedroom Communities**, **Areas of Economic Distress**, and **Concentrations of Second Homes**.

These typologies are descriptive tools rather than rigid categories. They help state and local leaders see patterns in demographic trends, infrastructure gaps, and economic structures across rural Massachusetts, and they inform how investments, technical assistance, and policy reforms can be tailored to local context.

Suburbs and Bedroom Communities

These municipalities sit at the outer edge of the Greater Boston region, around Worcester and Springfield, Hartford, Connecticut, and near Providence, Rhode Island. Many are experiencing population growth as households priced out of the inner metro areas seek more attainable home prices and a different quality of life, often in exchange for longer commutes. Median incomes in these towns tend to be closer to or above the statewide median, but they still share core rural characteristics, including lower development densities, auto dependence, and limited transit options.

Suburban and bedroom-community towns often face rapid housing development pressure without the staff capacity, infrastructure, or planning tools needed to channel that growth. They are on the front lines of managing traffic congestion on rural roads, protecting working lands and open space from fragmentation, and providing services to a growing and sometimes more diverse population with small municipal workforces and constrained revenues. For these communities, rural policy must emphasize proactive land-use planning, context-sensitive transportation investments, and tools to produce housing that is attainable for local workers while preserving community character.



Downtown Dartmouth.

Areas of Economic Distress

A second set of rural communities includes the most rural, least dense, and most geographically isolated parts of the state, with concentrations in the central and northern Berkshires, Franklin County, and portions of Hampshire, Hampden, and Worcester counties. These places are typically characterized by slow growing or declining population, higher median age, lower household incomes, and fewer transportation and broadband options. Many of the acute challenges that motivated the creation of the Rural Policy Advisory Commission—limited fiscal resources, staffing constraints, and aging infrastructure—are most visible here.



Shelburne Falls village center.

In economically distressed rural areas, demographic trends are the single biggest structural challenge. Population loss and aging erode school enrollments, strain the viability of health care and local businesses, and depress property values, which in turn limits municipal revenue and the ability to keep up with basic infrastructure. These communities are more reliant on public and non-profit sectors for employment, and they have higher shares of self-employed workers and micro-businesses, often with tenuous margins and less access to technical assistance. Policy responses must therefore focus on stabilizing and diversifying local economies, attracting and retaining younger residents, sustaining essential services, and right-sizing infrastructure investments to local capacity.

Concentrations of Second Homes

This typology comprises rural communities with significant concentrations of second homes, especially in the southern Berkshires and on the Cape and Islands. These places see relatively high housing values and strong seasonal tourism, but far fewer year-round residents. The same amenities that draw visitors and second-homeowners—natural beauty, outdoor

recreation, cultural and historic assets—also shape their economic structure and infrastructure needs. Second-home communities face a distinct mix of pressures. High housing prices and limited year-round rental stock make it difficult for local workers and young families to live close to jobs, resulting in long commutes or labor shortages in key sectors such as hospitality, health care, education, and public safety. Infrastructure, especially water, sewer, transportation, and broadband, must be sized and financed for peak seasonal demand, which raises per-capita costs and complicates operations during the off-season. These communities also experience significant environmental stress—from wastewater and nitrogen loading to shoreline and watershed impacts—that demand sustained state-local partnership and flexible regulatory tools.
Policy response in this typology includes strengthening the year-round economy, lengthening the tourism season and focusing on workforce and middle income housing development.



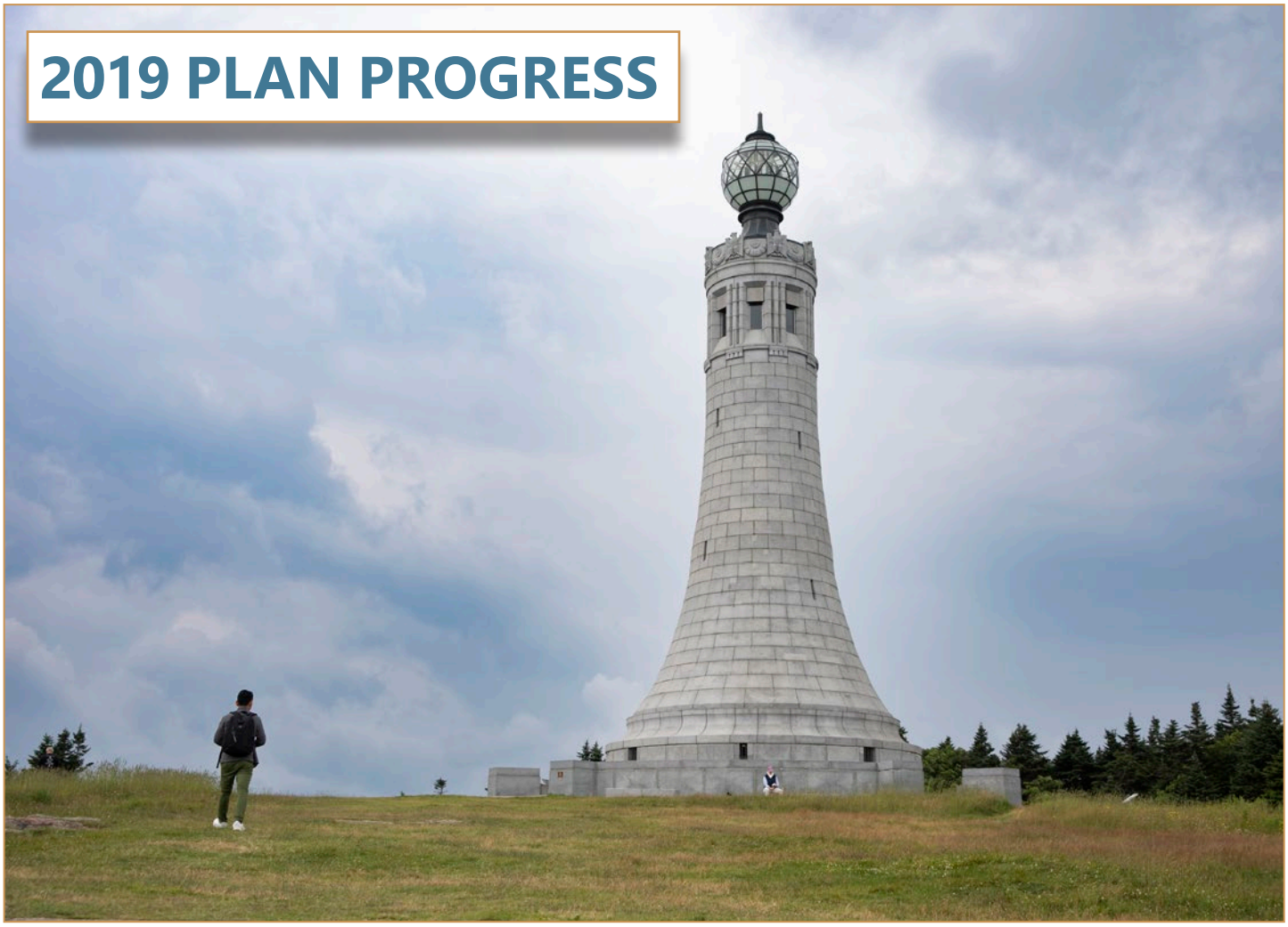
Street dining in Great Barrington.

Using the typologies in this Plan

These three typologies do not capture every nuance of rural Massachusetts, and many municipalities will see themselves in more than one category. Rather than assigning labels to individual communities, this Plan uses the typologies as a lens for understanding how statewide trends play out differently across rural places, and for tailoring recommendations so that implementation, funding formulas, and technical assistance can be more precisely aligned with local conditions.


Aerial view of Ware.

2019 PLAN PROGRESS



When the Rural Policy Advisory Commission released the first Rural Policy Plan in 2019, it put a bold agenda on the table: create dedicated rural policy structures, fix inequitable funding formulas, support shared services, redesign rural transportation, invest in water and sewer, ensure equitable education and public health, and launch targeted rural economic development strategies. In the years since, rural advocates, local leaders, and state partners have turned many of those priorities into concrete wins: new leadership positions, new funding streams, new programs, and major policy shifts that are transforming what is possible in rural Massachusetts.

This progress is also notable given that the COVID-19 pandemic sidelined many policy priorities for a sustained period as communities and state agencies navigated an unprecedented public health crisis, leaving fewer years to advance the plan's agenda.

The following pages highlight the progress made since the release of 2019 Rural Policy Plan.

Standing up Dedicated Rural Policy and Funding Tools

One of the 2019 Plan's signature recommendations was to create a permanent home for rural policy in state government. That vision was advanced when Governor Healey created the Director of Rural Affairs position within the Executive Office of Economic Development, and the Commonwealth established a Rural Development Fund as part of the Community One Stop for Growth program. These moves give rural communities an advocate and a flexible funding source that can seed local and regional projects, technical assistance, and capacity building that previously had no clear home. They do not, however, fully resolve the cross-secretariat nature of rural policy.

Photo: The War Memorial on Mt. Greylock in Lanesborough.

Acknowledging Unique Rural Schools Challenges

The 2022 "A Sustainable Future for Rural Schools", a report generated by the Commission on the Fiscal Health of Rural School Districts, was a significant achievement that identified and documented the challenges facing rural schools and made recommendations to address the systemic and growing financial burdens districts and municipalities face. Because of the study, Rural School Aid was created and has been maintained (though subject to annual budget ups and downs).

Elevating Rural Land Use, Outdoor Recreation, and Climate Roles

The 2019 Plan urged the Commonwealth to develop a statewide land use strategy that fully accounted for rural regions' land, water, and climate roles and to create a dedicated Office of Outdoor Recreation. Those ideas are now being realized. The Massachusetts Integrated Land Use Strategy (MILUS), currently in development, is explicitly designed to balance housing, conservation, clean energy, and economic development across the state. The Massachusetts Office of Outdoor Recreation (MOOR) has been established and is beginning to connect trail, water, and open space investments with rural economic development, infrastructure, and safety needs.

Securing Broadband and Powering Rural Economies

In 2019, widespread broadband gaps were holding back rural businesses, schools, health care, and remote workers. Today, broadband has been secured in all rural municipalities, fundamentally changing the baseline for economic development, education, and telehealth. Additionally, the state has expanded the Massachusetts Growth Capital Corporation's Small Business Technical Assistance program, and piloted village center business support and marketing initiatives in rural areas. These actions are beginning to energize rural downtowns and main streets and support small and micro businesses.

Addressing Municipal Sustainability

Two state auditors have highlighted the inequity of state-owned land, both the percentage of land permanently protected in rural areas and the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) formula that is based on property value growth. A PILOT Commission mandated by Governor Healey is underway with the charge of assessing the fiscal, equity and policy impact of the current distribution formula and the impact of state-owned land on host communities.

Transforming Rural Transportation Funding and Service

The 2019 Plan called for overhauling transportation funding formulas and service models that were built for cities, not dispersed rural regions. Since then, Fair Share revenue dedicated to transportation has helped increase Chapter 90 funding to $300 million annually, with $100 million distributed by road miles only—an approach that significantly boosts allocations for rural communities with extensive local road networks. A new Unpaved Roads Grant Program, funded at $7 million, was launched in FY26 to address long neglected gravel and dirt roads, while culvert and small bridge funding has increased by roughly $216 million, recognizing rural infrastructure's central role in climate resilience and safety.

At the same time, rural Regional Transit Authorities and community partners have used legislative earmarks, Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) grants, health care investments, and private and philanthropic support to pilot and scale microtransit and other flexible services that reach towns that had never seen public transit before. Rural riders today have more options, including fare free transit under current legislation, better multi-modal connections, and a growing recognition in statewide planning efforts that passenger rail and intercity bus links for rural regions are essential to the Commonwealth's economic future.

Strengthening Public Health

The 2019 Plan called for stronger rural public health infrastructure, and the need became abundantly clear during COVID-19. Rural Boards of Health were ill-equipped to serve the many, ongoing, and changing needs of municipalities and citizens. The passage of State Action for Public Health Excellence (SAPHE) 2.0 and the Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) have moved local public health systems toward regionalized, standards-based models that better match the recommendations in the original Plan. Rural residents now benefit from stronger shared public health districts, expanded telehealth, and more robust emergency preparedness and behavioral health capacity than in 2019, even as gaps remain.

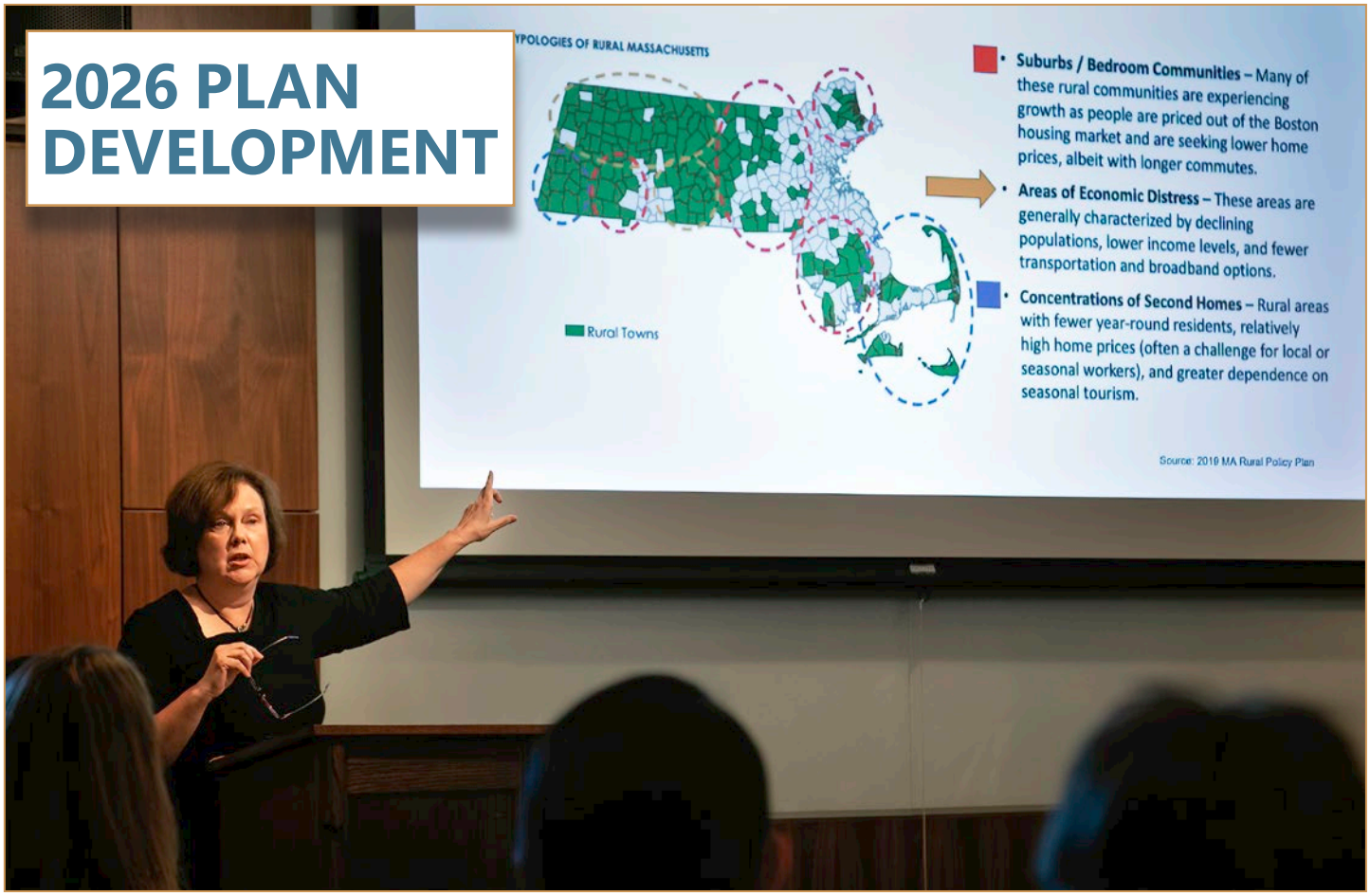
Laying Groundwork for Rural Water and Sewer Solutions

Large-scale investment in rural water and sewer remains a work in progress.

This progress demonstrates the value of a sustained rural policy agenda.

The 2026 Rural Policy Plan builds on the progress since 2019 while focusing attention on the remaining gaps and the actions most likely to advance rural equity.

2026 PLAN DEVELOPMENT



The 2026 Rural Policy Plan builds directly on the 2019 Plan while reorganizing the document to make it more useful to policymakers, practitioners, and local officials. This update organizes each chapter around a clear statement of rural conditions, a concise set of challenges and opportunities, and a focused menu of recommendations that state and local partners can realistically act on within the next several years.

The 2026 Plan also strengthens the connection between cross-cutting themes and sector chapters so that demographic trends, diversity and equity, and climate resilience are addressed consistently in each chapter's narrative and recommendations. Shorter narrative sections, clearer headings, and more targeted recommendation lists are intended to make it easier for busy readers to locate the issues most relevant to their work.

PLAN DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

From late fall 2025 through early spring 2026, RPAC members reviewed every recommendation and tactic included in the 2019 Rural Policy Plan and assessed the level of progress on each. Recommendations that had not been completed were evaluated for their continuing relevance and priority for the 2026 Plan. While some were determined to be less pressing or strategic, most uncompleted recommendations were carried forward. The Commission also identified emerging issues that had not been addressed in the 2019 Plan.

Using this updated inventory, the RPAC consulted with state and local stakeholders (including legislators, state secretaries and their designees, municipal officials, regional planning agency staff, and nonprofit community organizations) to identify current priorities and shape revised chapters and recommendations.

From late May through late June, the RPAC convened 18 listening sessions. Participants included hundreds of elected and appointed representatives of rural municipal governments, interested residents, state employees, legislators, educators, and nonprofit leaders. Participation reflected broad geographic

Photos: (above) RPAC Chair Linda Dunlavy presents rural typologies at a regional rural housing needs presentation; (right) aerial view of Nantucket.

representation, from the Berkshires in the west to the Cape and Islands in the east, with strong representation from the Pioneer Valley, central Massachusetts, the North Shore, and the South Shore.

The engagement process confirmed that the draft 2026 Plan identified many of the issues most consequential to rural vitality while also generating important refinements to the recommendations. Participants emphasized the need to tailor strategies to differing rural contexts, prioritize actions with the greatest potential impact, and establish clear communications, advocacy, and implementation structures after Plan adoption. Many attendees also noted the import of having the opportunity via the listening sessions to connect with one another.

The public engagement listening sessions informed several new elements of the 2026 Plan, including the framework for identifying uniquely rural and universal-but-amplified issues, the emphasis on capacity and rural equity, the recommendation classifications, and the cross-chapter discussion of interconnected issues.

CRITERIA FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

A central goal of the 2026 Plan is to ensure that each recommendation addresses a need that is either uniquely rural or universal but amplified in rural regions (meaning that the need that exists statewide but is felt more acutely or takes a different form in rural communities). Recommendations that would be equally applicable in any Massachusetts municipality without adjustment are not repeated here; instead, the Plan points to them only where rural context changes how they should be designed, funded, or implemented. Using this approach keeps the Plan focused on the distinct conditions of rural Massachusetts while still situating rural policy within broader statewide efforts.

To apply this filter, each chapter's authors and the Rural Policy Advisory Commission reviewed proposed recommendations against three questions:

1. Does this respond to **a condition that is substantially different in rural areas**?
2. If the issue is statewide, does **rural context change what is needed or how success should be measured**?
3. Will acting on this recommendation **meaningfully improve rural equity**, defined as fair access to services, opportunities, and resources regardless of a community's size, tax base, or geography?

Only those recommendations that met at least one of these criteria were included or carried forward from the 2019 Plan.



CAPACITY AND RURAL EQUITY AS THROUGH-LINES

Across the Plan, two recurring conditions shape both rural challenges and the solutions needed to address them: limited capacity and rural inequity.

Capacity-focused narrative and recommendations strengthen the ability of rural municipalities, regional entities, and community organizations to plan, staff, finance, and implement needed work. Relevant strategies include technical assistance, training, data support, staffing pipelines, and regional service models.

Rural equity narrative and recommendations address the ways that existing policies, programs, and funding formulas can inadvertently disadvantage low-density communities. These disadvantages often result from heavy reliance on population counts, per-capita metrics, or urban assumptions about economies of scale.

FOUR TYPES OF RECOMMENDATIONS

To aid implementation, the 2026 Rural Policy Plan sorts recommendations into four types: **policy**, **funding**, **programming**, and **legislative**.

- **Policy** recommendations establish or revise the goals, priorities, guidance, criteria, standards, or administrative practices that direct public decision-making. Policy may guide agency, regional, or local action without itself creating a legally binding requirement. Where a recommendation calls for a legally binding rule adopted by an authorized agency or local government, the Plan identifies that action as a **regulatory change** within the relevant recommendation.
- **Funding** recommendations focus on how resources are raised and distributed, including formula changes, new or dedicated funding streams, and adjustments to match requirements or grant scoring to account for rural capacity and costs.
- **Programming** recommendations describe specific initiatives, technical assistance efforts, or service models that agencies, regional partners, or local governments can launch or expand, such as regional housing coordination, shared transportation pilots, or rural workforce pipelines.
- **Legislative** recommendations identify where statutory changes are needed—such as authorizing new rural policy structures, adjusting municipal finance tools, updating enabling legislation, or directing or authorizing regulatory action.



A street sign pointing to attractions in Shelburne.

These labels make the Plan more actionable for different audiences. Legislators and their staff can identify where statutory action is needed; state agencies can identify policy, funding, and program changes within their authority; and regional and local leaders can identify capacity-building and implementation roles that do not require new legislation.

SEPARATE BUT INTERCONNECTED CHAPTERS

The chapters that follow are organized around single topics because that structure makes the Plan easier to navigate, yet no chapter's recommendations can be fully realized in isolation. Those who treat the Plan as nine unrelated menus risk funding solutions that undercut one another or overlooking the greater value of advancing related recommendations together. Considering the chapters together, rather than in isolation, is essential to understanding the full circumstances of any rural community.

This level of coordination cannot depend solely on informal relationships among agencies or on rural municipalities identifying and resolving conflicts after programs are launched. Ideally, the Commonwealth would have a designated rural-policy coordination lead, authorized to bring secretariats together around shared rural priorities, align implementation timelines and funding opportunities, and identify where one agency's policy may unintentionally undermine progress in another area.

Approaching this Plan holistically: Examples of how the chapters connect

Housing and water/wastewater.

New homes, accessory dwelling units, and rehabilitation of vacant buildings all depend on adequate septic and well capacity or access to public water and wastewater. The Housing chapter directly calls for tailoring on-site wastewater design assumptions to rural conditions, and the Water and Wastewater chapter commits to coordinating with housing programs so that septic and well constraints do not unnecessarily block small-scale infill. Funding one without the other stalls both.

Education financing, state-owned land and municipal sustainability.

Some rural municipalities now devote up to 70% of the municipal budget to education. The Municipal Sustainability chapter recognizes this directly, pointing to Chapter 70 reform as a prerequisite for municipal fiscal health. A rural town cannot be made more fiscally sustainable without addressing school finance, and school finance reform cannot be fully evaluated without understanding its municipal budget effects. Similarly, the Land Use chapter's call to modernize the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) framework is also a Municipal Sustainability recommendation. Progress on one is progress on the other; failure or inaction on one undermines the other.

Housing, transportation, broadband, and the rural workforce.

Employers in health care, trades, education, and municipal government cannot fill open positions if workers cannot afford to live nearby, cannot get to the job site, or cannot access training online. The Economic Development chapter calls for coordinating transportation, broadband, and housing initiatives with workforce programs—a recommendation that only succeeds if the Housing, Transportation, and Technology chapter recommendations are funded and implemented in tandem.

Climate resilience across land, water, and roads.

A single undersized culvert can wash out a rural road, cut off emergency response, damage a wastewater system, and flood adjacent farmland in the same storm. The Transportation chapter's push to streamline culvert and small bridge permitting and the Land Use chapter's call for watershed-scale flood resilience planning describe the same underlying infrastructure and the same climate risk from two directions.

What a Holistic Approach Looks Like in Implementation

- **A Commonwealth-designated rural-policy coordination lead, working in partnership with the Rural Policy Advisory Commission and relevant secretariats and agencies**, should track these connections; identify where sequencing, timing, or funding gaps in one area are limiting progress in another; and develop coordinated responses.
- **State agencies** reviewing rural grant applications should recognize when a proposal in one domain depends on progress in another.
- **Legislative committees** taking up a single chapter's recommendations should ask what related chapters need to move in parallel.
- **Municipal advocates** focused on a single topic should maintain that focus and passion but be cognizant of how the topic benefits and/or impacts other issues and challenges.

Treating the chapters and recommendations that follow as one interconnected rural agenda, rather than as nine separate agendas, will help the Commonwealth achieve more durable and mutually reinforcing results.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND WORKFORCE



THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND WORKFORCE GOAL:

Build resilient rural economies that sustain working lands, support small and growing businesses, strengthen village centers, welcome new families, and connect rural residents to household-sustaining jobs across Massachusetts.

THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

The rural economy in Massachusetts is dynamic and innovative, and it also differs markedly from that of Greater Boston and other urban areas. Sectors that are central to rural economic vitality include agriculture and aquaculture, forestry and wood products, renewable energy generation, outdoor recreation and tourism (sectors most vulnerable to climate change), the creative economy, and small-scale manufacturing, all supported by a landscape of very small and often family-owned businesses. Many rural village centers are trying to strengthen year-round viability by expanding tourism markets and services for visitors.

Rural areas have historically experienced slower job growth and have benefited less during economic booms than urban and suburban communities. Most rural firms have fewer than five employees or are sole proprietorships. Rural municipalities face significant constraints in fostering economic development because of limited professional capacity, aging or absent infrastructure, and difficulty competing for discretionary grants that are often calibrated to larger

Photos: (above) Commerce at the Pittsfield Farmers Market; (right) MA Director of Rural Affairs Anne Gobi addresses a crowd at Berkshire Brewing Company in South Deerfield.

markets and sectors. While broadband investments and shifts toward remote and hybrid work have created new opportunities for some bedroom and seasonal communities, many market-constrained regions still struggle to attract private investment and state resources despite having available space and strong quality-of-life assets. A new and unique challenge facing rural regions is the increase in private school and small college closures. When located in a rural community, the closures result in a significant drain on employment opportunities and economic activity. The rural economy remains fragile and highly exposed to climate change, stagnant or declining population trends, shortages of available workers, and continued underinvestment in small business support, infrastructure, and local government capacity.

Since the 2019 Rural Policy Plan, there have been important wins. The Commonwealth created the Rural Development Fund as part of the One Stop for Growth suite of funding opportunities, established the Office of Outdoor Recreation at the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, expanded Massachusetts Growth Capital Corporation's Small Business Technical Assistance funding, secured broadband in all rural municipalities, and piloted at least one initiative to provide small business assistance and marketing support to businesses in rural village centers. These steps matter, but they have not yet changed the underlying reality that many rural communities have thin benches for economic development, limited access to capital, and a narrow set of tools to attract and retain private investment, leaving them vulnerable to continued out-migration of younger workers and families.

Workforce development is a binding constraint across rural economies and public services. Rural workforce systems must cover large geographic areas with limited staff and funding, and rural regions typically have fewer nearby educational institutions and career training providers. Social safety net and workforce services have often been relocated to urban centers, while rural residents contend with limited public transit, childcare shortages, gaps in broadband and digital literacy, and fewer options for vocational and occupational education, adult basic education, and English language learning, conditions that can trap low-income rural households in cycles of underemployment and poverty. MassHire career centers serving rural regions operate with small staffs tied to population and unemployment-based funding formulas that can force reductions or closure of satellite offices when unemployment falls, even though underemployment and barriers



to employment remain. Employers in critical sectors such as health care, manufacturing, trades, education, childcare, agriculture, and municipal government report persistent difficulty filling positions, while residents who want to work or skill up struggle with distance, cost, and limited support services. At the same time, rural regions often benefit from strong collaboration and partnerships across workforce boards, career centers, community colleges, community development corporations, chambers or commerce, and tourism councils, which can be powerful platforms if they are adequately resourced. (This same partnership and collaboration does not always hold true with larger universities located in rural areas of Massachusetts like the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. It has been historically difficult for municipalities and businesses in the Amherst area to forge strong, ongoing, beneficial partnerships with UMass departments, programs and projects.)

These dynamics call for an economic development agenda that is explicitly rural rather than a scaled-down version of metropolitan strategies. Rural economic success depends on strengthening sectors that are already present and can grow; aligning state and local policies so that working lands are conserved and productively used; reinvesting in village centers and legacy industrial sites with appropriate infrastructure; and building durable local and regional workforce pipelines that reduce barriers and connect rural residents to family-sustaining jobs without requiring them to leave their communities.

In this chapter, recommendations are sorted into two categories: economic and small business development, and workforce development. Items in this chapter are ranked in relative order of import within each section.



A street fair in Lee.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND WORKFORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

*In this chapter, recommendations are sorted into two categories: **economic and small business development**, and **workforce development**. Items in this chapter are ranked in relative order of import within each section.*

Recommendations that address farming, forestry and outdoor recreation are in the Land Use chapter.

A rural economic development agenda must build capacity as well as fund projects.

The recommendations are led by **Funding** and **Programming** actions: sustained, flexible investment in village centers, small businesses, workforce infrastructure, and regional technical assistance. Complementary **Policy** changes would ensure state programs recognize rural scale, distance, staffing constraints, and the locally significant impact of smaller investments.

Economic and Small Business Development

1. **Strengthen rural village centers and economic development capacity.**
   a. Prioritize programs such as the Massachusetts Downtown Initiative Capital Program, Downtown Vitality, One Stop for Growth, re-established and better funded Community Compact Best Practices and Efficiency & Regionalization programs, and MassDevelopment tools to support sustained, place-based investments in rural village centers and clusters of towns. This includes funding regional coordinators—housed within regional organizations—to help municipalities develop and implement shared economic visions, build partnerships, and coordinate initiatives over multiple years.

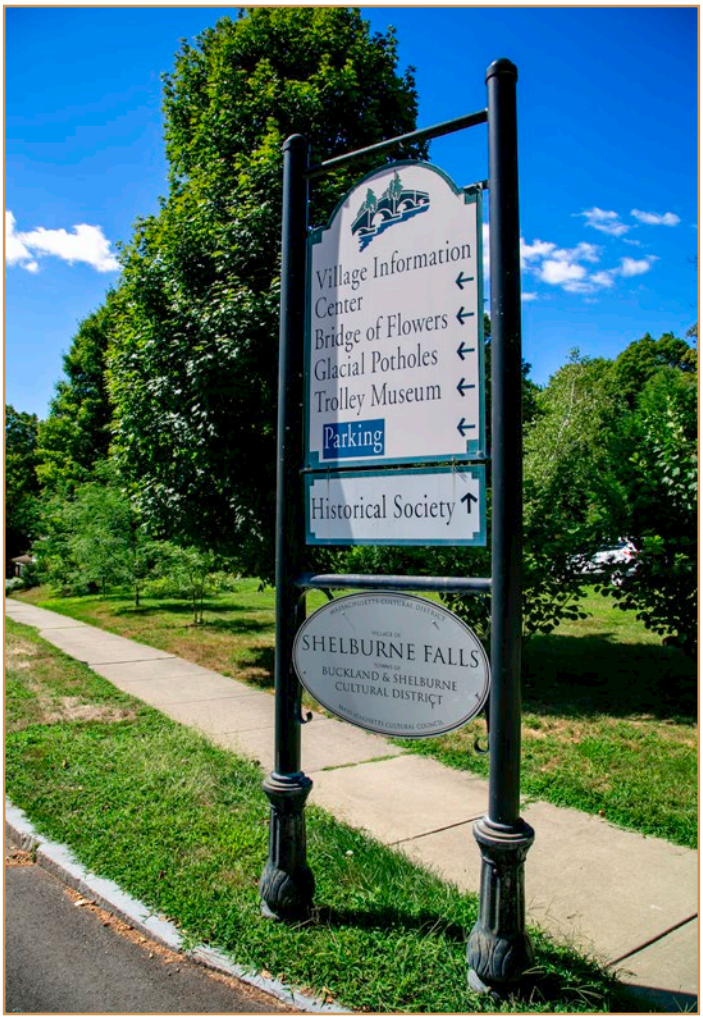
2. **Assist rural small and micro businesses and producers.**
   a. Sustain and broaden small business technical assistance and capital access in rural areas; ensure that rural Community Development Corporations and other qualified organizations, through funding for the Massachusetts Growth Capital Corporation, can deliver services.
   b. Deploy flexible, low-barrier capital and loan products that work for very small deals, can be combined with grants, and can use federal-state matching opportunities for revolving loan funds serving rural small businesses.
   c. Streamline and clarify health and safety code requirements for rural small-business start-ups.
   d. Support collective marketing and retail initiatives—including Massachusetts-made product campaigns, rural general stores expanding into food service and value-added products, and similar efforts that strengthen rural village-center business districts.
   e. Expand food, farm and forestry business diversification and viability loans and grants to ensure that these businesses that are central to rural quality of life sustain and grow. (*Also see Land Use recommendations*.)
   f. Develop rural supply chain clusters to support rural ecosystems.

3. **Ensure One Stop for Growth grant programs, including MassDevelopment's, and other state economic tools, allow rural projects with modest budgets and incremental impacts to be competitive, not overshadowed by large, urban projects.**
   a. Strengthen rural project financing, predevelopment and site readiness support.
   b. Provide competitive grants and technical assistance for regional organizations and coordinated groups of rural towns to conduct predevelopment planning, feasibility analysis, and investment-readiness work for community-driven projects such as mixed-use village center redevelopment, industrial areas for small-scale manufacturing, and working-lands facilities, and

help them stack federal, state, and private tools, including Opportunity Zone investments where applicable.

c. Reduce grant thresholds and job creation requirements for rural projects to support more small but critical rural ventures.

4. **Realign Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism (MOTT) Regional Tourism Council (RTC) contracts so that award amounts are communicated by September 1st, funds are allocated by October 1st; and reduce 1:1 match requirements for rural RTCs.** Currently, RTCs receive annual MOTT funding halfway through the state fiscal year, with the requirement that funds must be allocated by June 30, which is particularly onerous for rural, small-staffed RTCs. The 1:1 match revenue and spend requirements limit the grant amount that any rural RTC representing lower-income, small-business-based communities can responsibly accept, thereby limiting growth and opportunity for rural RTCs.



Wayfinding sign for the village of Shelburne Falls.

5. **Develop regional rural economic development technical assistance programs housed in rural Regional Planning Agencies and/or Community Development Corporations to address unique rural municipal challenges and capacity constraints. Services to include are:**

a. Shared, multi-municipal economic development planning and community development.

b. Municipal education and civic engagement promoting economic development projects before projects that are misunderstood are scuttled by a community.

c. Development, expansion and promotion of rural youth job opportunities.

d. Business succession planning.

e. Promotion of elders as entrepreneurs, mentors and docents.

Workforce Development

6. **Stabilize rural workforce infrastructure and ensure equitable access to workforce programs.**

a. Provide sustained funding to stabilize essential services at MassHire Career Centers in rural regions, recognizing that federal workforce allocation formulas do not adequately account for the higher costs of delivering services across large, geographically dispersed service areas. Supplemental rural funding should support core staffing, employer engagement, outreach, satellite and mobile service delivery, and other infrastructure necessary to ensure equitable access.

b. Incorporate rurality and service-delivery factors into state workforce funding and program design (e.g. distance and travel time to comprehensive Career Centers, transportation availability, and the cost of maintaining equitable access across large regions).

c. Design rural workforce funding to minimize reliance on competitive grant processes that can disadvantage regions with limited administrative and grant-writing capacity. Where possible, use objective rural eligibility criteria, formula-based or designated funding, multi-year awards, reduced match requirements, and flexible allowable uses that enable rural regions to build sustained capacity rather than repeatedly compete for short-term projects.

7. **Build rural talent pipelines through education–workforce partnerships.**
   a. Enhance sustained investment in program development and staffing for partnerships that connect regional workforce boards, MassHire Career Centers, community colleges and state universities, vocational and technical high schools, adult education providers, employers, and community-based organizations. Investments should support sector partnerships and career pathways in priority rural industries such as health care, skilled trades, advanced manufacturing, agriculture, education, and municipal services, and include strategies that embed workforce and career counseling staff in schools, libraries, community organizations, and other locations where rural residents already learn, work, and gather.
   b. Expand rural access to work-based learning, including registered apprenticeship, pre-apprenticeship, paid internships, on-the-job training, and other earn-and-learn models, by providing technical assistance and financial support to smaller employers that may lack the human resources or administrative capacity to establish and sustain these programs independently.
   c. Support regional approaches to workforce development that allow rural communities to aggregate demand across multiple employers and municipalities. Funding models should recognize that individual rural employers may not have enough hiring volume to support standalone training cohorts, even when a significant regional workforce need exists.

8. **Reduce barriers to employment and workforce participation and attract a diverse rural workforce.**
   a. Advance universal pre-K and childcare goals with explicit strategies for rural childcare deserts, including capital and operating support, workforce development for early educators, and alignment with broader rural workforce and economic strategies.
   b. Integrate transportation, broadband, housing, and workforce investments so that economic development initiatives account for whether rural residents can realistically access new jobs and training opportunities. Support flexible transportation solutions, remote and hybrid training infrastructure, and housing development near employment and education centers, in recognition that workforce shortages cannot be addressed independently from these underlying barriers.
   c. Support local and regional efforts that promote welcoming, inclusive rural communities and connect new residents—including younger workers, families, and immigrants from diverse backgrounds—to employment, entrepreneurship resources, and civic engagement opportunities.
   d. Provide flexible funding for supportive services that address the practical barriers preventing rural residents from entering or remaining in employment and training, including transportation, childcare, work-related equipment and clothing, credentialing costs, technology, and other locally identified needs. Allow regional workforce organizations sufficient flexibility to respond to barriers that may differ substantially from those experienced in more densely populated areas.



Harvesting oysters on Cape Cod.

EDUCATION



THE EDUCATION GOAL:

Ensure all rural Massachusetts students receive high-quality education by stabilizing school finances and sustaining strong community-centered schools despite declining enrollment and rising costs.

THE EDUCATION CHALLENGE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Rural Massachusetts faces an educational crisis rooted in the mismatch between fixed costs and declining revenues. In rural districts, per-pupil costs are significantly higher (16.7% higher in municipal districts and 22.7% higher in regional districts with fewer than 1,300 students), primarily because it is difficult for small districts to create economies of scale. Many small districts have experienced a dramatic decrease in enrollment due to demographic changes, including population loss and aging in rural counties, combined with competition from private schools, homeschooling, cross-district school choice, charter schools, and career-vocational-technical (CVTE) high schools. Declining enrollments do not lead to proportional decreases in expenses. Fixed costs for transportation, employee benefits, special education, higher per-pupil costs for Charter and Vocational students (that are the responsibility of the sending district), facility maintenance, administration and legacy costs such as retiree health insurance from an era of higher enrollments remain or increase even when student populations shrink.

The current Chapter 70 school funding formula does not adequately account for the higher per-pupil cost of rural schools and other costs that are disproportionately higher in rural districts (e.g., transportation costs of out-of-district placements for services unavailable in rural areas), and factors in the formula like income and Equalized Valuation (EQV) can have a disproportionate impact on rural municipalities (i.e., a community with a small number of households has a lower denominator that cannot counter or absorb outliers). Despite a legislative promise of full funding for regional school transportation that encouraged many towns to regionalize districts decades ago, this promise has

Photos: (above) Students at Frontier Regional School in Deerfield participate in the March 2026 Rural and Declining Enrollment Schools Week of Action by spelling out "SOS" (Save Our Schools) at a rally; (right) an assembly at Leverett Elementary School.

never been realized. Lack of competition for school transportation vendors results in double digit increases with each contract renewal, increased fuel prices and large geographic areas that require multiple buses come at the cost of teaching and learning.

School Choice and Charter Schools vie for limited students and the Charter School funding formula often results in districts paying out a higher per student cost than they can invest in their own students. The Special Education Circuit breaker formula does not recognize the cost of transporting students long distances for services, which is typical in rural areas, and the timing of reimbursement from the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is unpredictable and is not in the year the expense is borne.

In addition to the pressures created by school choice and other enrollment shifts, rural communities face significant gaps in access to affordable, reliable early childhood education and care, including preschool options that support kindergarten readiness. Provider shortages, staffing challenges, long travel distances, transportation barriers, and the difficulty of sustaining programs in sparsely populated areas have made these gaps especially acute in many rural regions. Limited early childhood options can constrain parents' workforce participation, deter families from moving to or remaining in rural communities, and contribute to unequal early learning opportunities for rural children. These access challenges may also weaken rural districts' ability to build stable enrollment and support successful transitions into K–12 public education.

These enrollment, funding, transportation, school-choice, and early-childhood access pressures result in disparities in educational opportunities and create intense competition for limited local financial resources between schools and town government. Many rural municipalities report that up to 70% of municipal budgets are dedicated to education costs, which results in low-staffed town halls, limited services to residents and decaying infrastructure.

While Rural School Aid began in FY19, the need for increased state aid for rural and small school districts was well documented in the 2022 "A Sustainable Future for Rural Schools" that identified the need for $60m in Rural School Aid. Because Rural School Aid is subject to annual appropriation, it cannot provide the stable, predictable support rural districts need. While the Rural School Aid line item grew from $1.5 million in FY19 to $16 million in FY25, the appropriation was cut by 25% to $12 million for FY26 and brought back to $16m in FY27, which is both far from what is needed by these districts and is also unpredictable, making it difficult for districts to rely on these funds for essential expenses such as educator salaries and special education. Most of Massachusetts's 65 districts receiving Rural School Aid have seen zero additional dollars from the Student Opportunity Act since 2019. "A Sustainable Future for Rural Schools"



did not identify reopening the Chapter 70 formula as its primary recommendation because, as with many rural equity issues, it quickly became clear that changing the Chapter 70 formula to improve rural equity could reduce funding to districts in more populous parts of the state and would not be politically supported. Ultimately, such "hold harmless" policies, have made things worse for rural districts. In FY27, now that more than 50% of school districts across the state, including suburban and urban districts, are "minimum aid communities", examination of Chapter 70 and the foundation formula are finally set to be examined.

Advocates describe a vicious cycle: after non-essential programs are cut, families with options move their children elsewhere, leading to further enrollment loss, lower aid, and deeper cuts, until only the poorest and neediest students remain, with access to a hollowed-out education. (The Central Berkshire District reports that in FY26, 100% of the district's Kindergartners were eligible for Free and Reduced lunch and all required behavioral health services.) In March of 2026 and after the continued lack of response and seeming lack of understanding by DESE, advocacy became coordinated highlighting the increasing desperation rural communities feel about education financing. The Rural and Declining Enrollment School Week of Action resulted in educators, students and families from rural school districts across the state highlighting their concerns to send a message to the Statehouse in Boston.

While rural districts do collaborate on some programs and services, deeper regionalization is often prohibitively expensive, politically difficult and will not solve the financial crisis. Small elementary schools often serve as community hubs that residents are unwilling to lose, and long bus rides for young children create additional barriers to consolidation. Rural communities in Massachusetts need policy solutions that recognize rural context, rather than assuming that further regionalization alone can resolve these challenges. Where regionalization is a possible solution, the costs and effort to study effective models requires sustained, multi-year funding to arrive at meaningful models. In the summer of 2026, as this Plan was nearing completion, Governor Healey signed H.5470, the FY26 supplemental budget, which included a $16.5 million grant line item for a dedicated grant program for school district regionalization and shared services. As a first-year appropriation, this is a promising start to ongoing support for regionalization and shared services planning and technical assistance.

Local property taxpayers cannot afford to continue paying ever-increasing costs that out-pace inflation and out-pace the limits of proposition 2 ½. Absent meaningful and timely implementation of the following recommendations, and the active, participatory and meaningful engagement of DESE to make significant policy and financing changes, many rural school districts will fail.



Aerial view of Leicester High School.

EDUCATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Rural schools need financing systems that reflect rural realities.

The recommendations are led by **Funding** actions—stable Rural School Aid, formula reform, and more reliable reimbursement for rural costs—and supported by **Policy**, **Programming**, regulatory, and **Legislative** changes. Together, they would stabilize district finances, support appropriate collaboration, and preserve high-quality, community-centered schools.

1. **Until a full overhaul of Chapter 70 and the Foundation Budget formula, increase Rural School Aid to $68.5 million with annual increases tied to inflation.** The Commonwealth should include the full $68.5 million dollars in Rural School Aid funding recommended by the 2022 Rural Schools Commission[1] in the FY28 budget and restore recent cuts through supplemental appropriations where possible. Unless or until the state's education formula is revised to recognize the inequities and unique challenges facing rural school districts, Rural School Aid funding will still be necessary and, thus, could be strengthened by:
   a. Clarifying and codifying the purpose and targeting of Rural School Aid. Maintain Rural School Aid as additional education aid for towns and regional districts that qualify based on income level and student-population sparsity, with tiered priorities so that the sparsest districts receive the largest portion of aid.
   b. Allowing fiscal-year holdovers. Allow districts to carry Rural School Aid funds across fiscal years so that they can better plan for sustainable budgets, rather than receiving aid in the fall and having to spend it down by the end of the fiscal year.
   c. Using multi-year averages for eligibility. Calculate Rural School Aid eligibility using a three-year average, ensuring that a single unanticipated one-year difference does not have an undue impact on aid levels.
   d. Phasing down aid gradually when eligibility is lost. Allow for a graduated decline in aid when a district is no longer eligible based on income or enrollment, so districts are not forced to absorb abrupt funding cliffs.

2. **Through the pending Foundation Formula Review Commission, reform the Chapter 70 foundation formula and the local contribution formula to recognize increased per pupil costs in rural districts and the unique rural financial impacts of factors in the formulas.** On the expense side, per pupil costs are between 16 and 23 percent higher in rural districts because of unavoidable fixed and legacy costs, which should be factored into the state's contribution percentage to rural districts. On the revenue side, the formula should be revised to recognize and reduce the impact of outliers in small rural communities.
   a. Use median, or even the mode, income in the formula or create some other factor to eliminate the impact of a few wealthy residents in an otherwise low-income town.
   b. Temper the use of EQV for land-rich, income-poor communities. Adjust how EQV is used to recognize that large rural landowners, such as farmers and foresters who are land-rich but not income-rich, should not push rural towns into higher required local contributions than residents can realistically afford.
   c. Analyze and consider adding modifiers to the formula or providing full state funding for specific unique problems such as:
      i. Education costs for children in court-appointed foster care.
      ii. Geographic modifier/additive to account for transportation and other extraordinary costs for special education out-of-district placements when services are not available in or near the district.

[1]The 2022 "A Sustainable Future for Rural Schools" recommended $60m of rural school aid. $68.5m is the 2026 inflation-adjusted amount.

iii. Reduction to assumed school enrollment of 350 students in rural districts.
iv. Legacy cost additive for schools with significant enrollment decline.
v. Increased behavioral health funding, including an assessment of percent of K-12 population requiring services and modifying the funding allocation to districts that have a disproportionate number of students requiring services.
vi. Charter school reimbursement formula.

3. **Expand access to high-quality early childhood education in rural communities.** The Commonwealth should develop and fund rural-appropriate preschool and early education models, including consideration of expanding eligibility for the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative beyond Gateway Cities, supporting school- and community-based delivery models, and accounting for the higher per-child costs associated with transportation, small enrollment, staffing recruitment, and dispersed geography in rural areas.

4. **Adopt H.517/S.314 – A Sustainable Future for Rural Schools and aligned policy changes to stabilize rural district finances.** A Sustainable Future for Rural Schools includes reforms that are designed to stabilize rural district budgets, preserve core educational opportunities, and prevent the negative cycle that many rural communities now face. Recommended reforms include:
   a. Robust Rural Aid and a declining enrollment fund.
   b. Reimbursement for out-of-district transportation and foster care transportation.
   c. Fully funded regional transportation.
   d. Examination of DESE's binding regulations and administrative requirements as they affect rural schools.
   e. Financial and practical support for regionalization where appropriate.
   f. More equitable geographic representation on the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

5. **Support comprehensive collaboration between rural schools through dedicated funding and facilitated shared services.** Regionalization is



Students at Frontier Regional School in Deerfield participate in the March 2026 Rural and Declining Enrollment Schools Week of Action.

very difficult and will not resolve the financial crisis in rural Massachusetts. It could, however, improve the quality of education and expand educational offerings for some districts. In June 2026, the Legislature and Governor established a $16.5 million School District Regionalization and Shared Services Grant Program through the FY26 supplemental budget directly responsive to this recommendation. The Commonwealth should build on this initial investment with the sustained, multi-year funding described below, and rural districts should engage early with DESE's forthcoming public toolkit on regionalization and shared services.

a. Create incentives and technical assistance for shared services including special education, advanced education classes, transportation, human resources, procurement, collective bargaining and shared administrative services and leadership.
b. Provide multi-year dedicated funding and technical assistance to help rural districts explore and implement shared services.
c. Build DESE's statewide technical assistance capacity for rural collaboration and regionalization so that DESE is a full, dedicated and expert partner that can support rural districts during shared services planning and full regionalization exploration.
d. Ensure the new School District Regionalization and Shared Services Grant Program (FY26 supplemental budget, $16.5M) is renewed and expanded in future budget cycles, that its DESE-administered public toolkit is developed with meaningful rural input, and that grant outreach reaches under-resourced districts that may lack capacity to competitively apply.

6. Address the unique challenges and disparities experienced by rural school districts and municipalities through more extensive DESE policy, programmatic, and regulatory actions. The Commonwealth/DESE could:

a. Conduct statewide school transportation vendor bidding to increase competition and reduce costs.
b. Offer professional assistance and mediation to local districts during union contract negotiations.
c. Increase rural circuit breaker reimbursement to cover the full cost of transportation and a higher percentage of out of district placement costs, and provide a predictable and consistent date for the reimbursement.
d. Prohibit the creation of new or the expansion of existing Charter Schools in rural areas with declining enrollment.
e. Create and fund rural special education centers to improve education service delivery and reduce unpredictable costs.
f. Convene a study group or commission to examine the impact of School Choice in areas of severe declining enrollment.
g. Take on a larger percentage of education costs statewide and reduce reliance on the regressive local property tax.



A playground in Great Barrington.

HOUSING



THE HOUSING GOAL:

Expand and preserve the supply of safe, affordable homes in rural Massachusetts by tailoring state tools to rural markets and strengthening local and regional capacity to enable every rural community to support the Commonwealth's "Home for Everyone" vision.

THE HOUSING CHALLENGE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Massachusetts faces a statewide housing shortfall and affordability crisis, and rural communities are fully part of that story even though their numbers are smaller in absolute terms. Rural regions in western and central Massachusetts have some of the lowest wages, lowest vacancy rates, and highest renter cost-burden in the state, while also shouldering aging housing stocks and limited local revenues. Rural communities in southern Berkshire County, those surrounding Boston, and on the Cape and Islands struggle to provide affordable, elder and workforce housing in an inflated housing market.

Investment in both new and existing housing is vital in rural towns, where there is a deep mismatch between current housing stock and current needs. Older homes, changing household sizes, an aging population and the pressure of second homes and short-term rentals all contribute to a shortage of decent, affordable units for current residents and for the new households rural regions need to attract to remain viable. All types of housing are needed in rural markets, including the development and

Photos: (above) Multifamily housing in Hadley; (right) a neighborhood in Nantucket.

rehabilitation of housing that creates opportunity for elders to age in place (for example, on the Cape, there is an increasing need for small studio and 1-bedroom units for seniors), workforce housing, and multi-generational housing that supports children, parents and grandparents in complex living situations. In market-constrained rural communities, rents and sale prices are too high for many local workers to afford yet still too low to cover the full cost of development, especially once the price of wells, septic systems, roads, parking, and stormwater infrastructure is included—leaving projects with large unrecoverable gaps. At the same time, rural communities offer relatively lower land costs, strong social networks, and high quality of life that could attract mission-driven and small-scale developers if state programs lowered risk and improved deal feasibility.

These financial realities are compounded by structural, regulatory and political barriers. Most rural communities lack full public water and sewer coverage, and many have none at all, which sharply constrains where multi-family or denser homeownership development can occur and increases per-unit costs, even for small projects or ADUs. Rehabilitating underutilized and vacant properties could bring new housing units online relatively quickly, but it is often economically infeasible in communities where incomes and property values are far below state averages. Low assessed values can cause rehabilitation projects to reach thresholds that trigger costly State Building Code upgrades sooner, while septic standards can require expensive system upgrades even for modest improvements.

Before new development can move forward, town leaders often need to build public understanding of why housing remains a critical need, even in communities experiencing population decline. Declining population does not necessarily reduce housing demand: household sizes are shrinking, more residents are living alone or aging in place, and changing household structures require a broader range of homes. Communities need housing that enables older residents to downsize and frees up larger homes, workforce housing that attracts younger households, and alternatives to detached single-family homes that expand the diversity, affordability, and adaptability of the rural housing stock.

Rural municipalities also operate with limited administrative capacity and narrow fiscal bases. Many rural towns rely overwhelmingly on residential property taxes, have very low equalized property values, are close to or are effectively at their Proposition 2½ levy limits, and have few or no



planning or housing staff, making it difficult to assemble and manage complex housing deals or to meet evolving state "best practice" benchmarks, such as the fact that state-approved Housing Production Plans are only valid for five years despite limited growth and change in most rural communities. At the same time, many of the Commonwealth's newer housing tools and incentives, from transit-oriented and Gateway City-oriented programs to Housing Choice and infrastructure initiatives, are designed around stronger markets, higher growth, or Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) service areas, which means rural, market-constrained communities often do not qualify, cannot compete, or lack the match and capacity needed to benefit. A recent success, thanks to the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC), is the release of the Rural and Small Town Housing Choice Program that acknowledges many rural municipalities have less capacity and depressed development markets despite municipal commitment to create favorable conditions for housing development. While the changes to required best practices are very welcome, eligibility to this program is still predicated on the production of a certain percentage of housing units.

The statewide housing plan, *A Home for Everyone*, and the Massachusetts Housing Needs Assessment call for increased production, preservation, stability, and equity across all regions. While rural housing production needs quantified by the EOHLC are generally lower than rural regions believe are actually needed, rural Massachusetts must be equipped to participate in and benefit from that agenda. For rural areas, that means addressing distinct barriers in each of these domains: making production financially feasible at small scales in weak markets and affordable in stronger markets and year-round in seasonal/vacation markets; preserving and rehabilitating existing housing stock; preventing displacement and instability among low-income renters and homeowners; aligning climate, infrastructure, and code reforms with rural conditions rather than inadvertently making development and rehab even harder; and, lastly, ensuring that production data used by EOHLC to monitor progress is accurate in rural regions.



A multi-family housing development in Westport.

HOUSING RECOMMENDATIONS

Rural housing requires tools that make small-scale development, rehabilitation, and preservation financially feasible.

The recommendations are led by **Funding** actions—rural-scaled subsidies, capital tools, tax credits, and capacity investments—to make housing development, rehabilitation, and preservation financially feasible. They are reinforced by **Policy**, **Programming**, regulatory, and targeted **Legislative** changes that improve access to state tools, reduce avoidable barriers, enable regional collaboration, and better reflect rural housing need.

1. **Create rural-appropriate capital tools, set asides and programs that acknowledge the challenges of building housing in rural towns and the increased costs of small-scale developments in areas without infrastructure**.
   a. Revise existing state housing programs (e.g., Affordable Housing Trust Fund, Housing Stabilization, Housing Innovations, and any Rural Development Fund successor) to provide competitive access for rural, small-scale housing developments.
   b. Provide substantially higher per-unit subsidies for rural housing projects to acknowledge the increased cost of small-scale but appropriately sized projects in areas without water, sewer or road access.
   c. Support rural small-scale projects, including small rental developments, clustered homeownership, ADUs, adaptive reuse, village-scale infill, and small-scale multifamily in or near traditional village centers, with subsidy levels calibrated to low rural rents and sale prices for rural constrained markets or the increased cost of land and construction materials for seasonal communities.
   d. Embed rural scoring criteria in the Qualified Allocation Plan so that rural communities and projects can realistically compete for tax credits.
   e. Offer non-competitive funding with a simplified application process, predevelopment assistance and technical support to rural municipalities that have limited capacity and staffing; avoid tying core funding to planning and zoning reforms that are difficult to achieve without capacity, nor entirely applicable in rural areas.
   f. Revise existing state funding streams to better align with the federally recognized Community Land Trust ground-lease model.

2. **Create a new place-based designation that complements existing designations, like Gateway Cities and Seasonal Communities, for rural municipalities with low population density, low equalized property value, limited water/sewer infrastructure, low housing production, high housing cost burden, and low rents relative to construction costs.**
   a. Support targeted outreach, pipeline development, and predevelopment grants to encourage nonprofit and for profit developers, builders, and modular manufacturers to pursue rural projects, including marketing materials that showcase rural housing opportunities in constrained markets.
   b. Expand access to homeownership subsidies through a rural analogue to Commonwealth Builder, expanded and more flexible Neighborhood Stabilization tools, and similar initiatives, so that moderate-income buyers and first-generation homeowners in non-sewered and weak-market towns can benefit from new construction, small-scale cluster developments, and rehabbed properties.

3. **Expand toolkit and funding mechanisms for Seasonal Communities that acknowledge the challenges of building and preserving year-round housing in rural areas where extremely high market prices are driven by the seasonal/vacation and luxury market.**
   a. Support existing and new regional Community Land Trusts, which can develop, re-develop,

hold, and monitor land and housing restricted to year-round occupancy in perpetuity at a variety of Area Median Incomes using the nationally recognized Ground Lease model, thus relieving the burden on rural municipal governments with limited capacity.

b. Develop state capacity to provide support for the development of housing and related programs for essential public-sector employees.

c. Advance legislative passage of a Local Option Transfer Fee to fund affordable and attainable year-round housing, including the acquisition of year-round deed restrictions and encourage more towns to take advantage of the Residential Exemption that reduces tax burden on year-round residents in communities with high second home markets.

4. **Make rehabilitation of existing housing financially and administratively feasible.** Increase and better target funding for rehabilitation of underutilized, vacant, distressed, or deteriorated rural housing, including both owner-occupied homes and small rental properties owned by local landlords.

   a. Supplement Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) with state dollars and support regional, multi-town rehabilitation programs administered by entities such as regional housing authorities.

   b. Clarify Community Preservation Act (CPA) language to allow funds to be used for rehabilitation of existing housing when a new affordable unit is created, e.g. conversion of a single-family home to a two-family home, creation of an accessory apartment, conversion of a seasonal home to a year-round home, etc.

   c. Review and adjust applicable regulations, regulatory triggers, and septic standards that can make modest rehab prohibitively expensive in low-value markets, including:

      i. Reassess statutory, regulatory, and code-based thresholds, including fixed percentages of assessed value, that can unintentionally trigger full code upgrades on modest rehab projects in low-value rural markets.

      ii. Where authorized, revise wastewater regulations, technical standards, or guidance to tailor on-site wastewater design assumptions to regional soils and actual household sizes in rural areas. *See Water and Wastewater*.



An example of adaptive reuse in Aquinnah; this former parsonage was converted into housing for members of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head.

iii. Provide more staffing to the Office of the Attorney General's Neighborhood Renewal Division to usher more abandoned homes through the receivership process.

5. **Make adaptive re-use of existing structures financially and administratively feasible.**
   a. Align state funding to better target adaptive re-use of underutilized or vacant structures, such as schoolhouses, parsonages, church buildings, barns, closed colleges, shopping malls and fire stations.
   b. Support local and regional efforts to identify underutilized parcels and buildings, including those with absentee landowners, and provide legal and technical assistance to convert suitable sites to housing through adaptive reuse or small-scale infill.
   c. Incentivize through funding or tax credits age-in-place modifications, home sharing and intergenerational housing.

6. **Fund rural housing development capacity.**
   a. Provide sustained funding for regional housing coordinators, technical assistance, and peer networks in rural regions, building on models such as regional housing plans, regional housing services offices, small-town housing working groups, and shared housing staff that have already proven effective in western Massachusetts.
   b. Provide assistance to RPAs to support the ongoing training and education for local boards, Town Meeting members, and municipal staff in rural communities so they can efficiently understand rural housing tools, communicate clearly about the need for housing of all types, affordability, and effectively support well-designed housing initiatives in public forums.
   c. Create a clearinghouse of best practices and approaches to public engagement and education, zoning, small-scale wastewater, etc. to help rural municipalities think about and promote housing development.
   d. Support the creation and updating of rural regional housing plans (in place of individual municipal plans) and implementation strategies with dedicated grants; recognize such plans as best practices in statewide policy and funding decisions; ensure that the lack of a municipal plan and/or slow pace of housing production, does not prevent low-capacity towns from accessing core programs; extend the life of municipal and regional housing plans from five years to ten years both in recognition that significant change to housing markets in many rural communities is slow and to acknowledge the limited existing capacity to generate these plans.
      i. Provide technical assistance and seed funding for the creation and initial operation of regional housing trusts and other innovative collaborations.
      ii. Support legislation like S.1307, An Act Relative to Regional Municipal Affordable Housing Trust Funds, that would allow rural municipalities to work together and share resources like CPA funds to develop housing. Related and in addition, allow a percentage of units developed in another town be counted towards a supporting community's Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI) when formal agreements, revenue sharing and/or a regional housing plan is in place.

7. **Analyze all housing development funding programs offered by the state to assess rural eligibility and if and how they restrict and/or encourage housing production in rural markets, including very small developments (<3 units).**

8. **Work with EOHLC to address data limitations to more accurately track rural housing production in the Commonwealth's regional housing needs assessments**. EOHLC is using the Census Address Count Listing Files to track housing production across the state. The dataset has known limitations, particularly for rural areas. For example, it considers all new residential addresses as housing units without regard to seasonal occupancy. Rural address list updates are also generally less reliable. This Census data lends itself to overestimates of the production of new housing available to residents. Better documenting and communicating these data limitations is key to informed policy-making that better reflects the goal to achieve a stable and growing population in rural Massachusetts. In particular, it is essential to ensure that data limitations and HLC's very low projections for rural housing production needs do not result in the Commonwealth underprioritizing new development in rural areas.

LAND USE



THE LAND USE GOAL:

Steward rural land in Massachusetts for the benefit of all of Massachusetts so communities can grow and develop sustainably, protect working lands and natural resources, host clean energy wisely, and be fairly compensated for their stewardship role.

THE LAND USE CHALLENGE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Land is the primary and prized asset of rural Massachusetts—supporting food and forest production, carbon sequestration, clean energy siting, outdoor recreation, and new housing. Yet it is far less "available" than it appears on a map. In Barnstable, Berkshire, Bristol, Franklin, Hampshire and Plymouth Counties, roughly 30 percent of land is already permanently protected. When land enrolled in Chapter 61 programs is added (acreage temporarily reserved for farming, forestry, or open space at reduced tax rates), protected land in many communities exceeds half of the land area. Once steep slopes, wetlands, and other undevelopable and sensitive areas are considered, the amount of land realistically available for new development is quite limited. That is not inherently a problem, but it fundamentally changes how the Commonwealth should think about where and how growth, economic development, conservation, and clean energy can be accommodated.

One of the top recommendations of the 2019 Rural Policy Plan was to create a statewide land use plan that could balance anticipated growth pressures around Greater Boston with slower growth and land rich conditions in rural regions. The Massachusetts Integrated Land Use Strategy (MILUS), now in

Photos: (above) aerial view of the Connecticut River in Hatfield; (right) herons nesting in Upton State Forest.

development, is designed to do exactly that. MILUS aims to prepare the Commonwealth for long term sustainability by prioritizing land use for four intertwined goals: producing an additional 220,000 housing units, permanently protecting 40 percent of total land area for carbon sequestration, food security, climate resilience, and other conservation purposes, siting enough clean energy facilities to reach net zero emissions by 2050, and maintaining Massachusetts' economic strength by identifying land suitable for growth of important Massachusetts economic sectors.

Since 2019 the state has also created the Office of Outdoor Recreation; launched a Farmland Action Plan to support agricultural viability; expanded One Stop for Growth to include a Rural Development Fund; revised the criteria for the Housing Choice Program; created a Disaster Relief Fund to help farmers and businesses recover from climate related disasters; streamlined permitting for single family houses and ecological restoration initiatives; given the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) the legal right to own land; and recognized the benefit of thinking on a watershed scale, and the rural stewardship responsibility of assets such as the Quabbin Reservoir.

Even with these advances, rural communities face significant land use challenges. Very small towns depend on volunteer boards and thinly staffed town halls to develop and administer zoning, subdivision rules, and other policies that are supposed to concentrate growth in centers, protect working lands and sensitive resources, identify appropriate sites for clean energy and storage, and respond to private proposals for large scale battery or solar installations. This is particularly difficult in southeastern Massachusetts where, due to the proximity to Boston and Providence, communities are experiencing some of the highest development pressures in the state. Farmers and foresters are already forced to adapt to changing climate conditions including shifting hardiness zones and change in viable crop varieties, the introduction of new pests and diseases, and shifting temperature and precipitation patterns that alter forest and farm ecosystems and species mixes. More frequent droughts and intense, localized storms test the resilience of rural watersheds, roads, culverts, and farm fields. Rural lands provide ecosystem



services that benefit the entire state—drinking water storage and recharge, carbon storage, habitat, flood and extreme heat mitigation, stormwater runoff absorption and filtration, and food and forest products—but those contributions are rarely fully recognized or compensated in state finance and policy.

Rural lands are an extraordinarily valuable resource and can be at the forefront for the Commonwealth to meet its important housing, conservation, clean energy and economic development goals, which is to the betterment of all of Massachusetts. Rural land should not be treated primarily as the "backyard" for statewide goals—hosting disproportionate shares of conservation land, clean energy projects, data centers and water supply protection—without adequately accounting for municipal fiscal impacts, working lands viability, or local priorities. For instance, state policy has inadvertently created incentives that have led to rural lands being used for ground mount solar projects, despite the loss of forest and farmland; the state also often uses urban-biased assessment tools that undervalue or simply ignore the resource that rural lands offer, like MassEnviroScreen (although the state acknowledges that the data does not reflect rural challenges and is open to revised and improved datasets).

As MILUS and related initiatives move forward, an opportunity exists for rural communities to be full partners and beneficiaries in those decisions that can fully account for municipal fiscal impacts, working lands viability, community sustainability and local priorities.



A solar array in Spencer.

LAND USE RECOMMENDATIONS

Rural land is a statewide asset, but should not be treated simply as the location for statewide needs.

The recommendations are led by **Funding**, **Policy**, and **Programming** actions: modernizing PILOT and resilience investments; embedding rural equity, local capacity, and balanced siting in MILUS and related state practices; and providing the planning, legal, and technical support communities need to steward land, working landscapes, and infrastructure. Targeted Legislative action would also secure and expand the Office of Outdoor Recreation.

1. **Modernize the state-owned land and watershed land reimbursement framework**.
   a. Through the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) Commission, recommend revising the PILOT formula or creating a complementary reimbursement factor for state owned land that reflects not just property value, but ecosystem services, climate and land use goals, and recognizes the way large state holdings constrain local economic developments.
   b. Ensure that reforms protect rural municipalities from continued erosion of their share of finite PILOT resources as property values grow faster in metropolitan areas. Without meaningful changes to state owned land reimbursement, rural communities will have limited willingness to support additional land protection.
   c. Include all protected land in the PILOT formula to ensure statewide equity.
   d. Include the impacts of MILUS goals into the analysis and assessment of formula changes.
   e. Consider creating a maximum and a minimum payment rather than holding all current payments harmless. Slow growing rural municipalities will never receive an equitable share of PILOT if a hold harmless provision is enacted.

2. **Ensure rural priorities are embedded in MILUS.**
   a. Ensure robust rural participation in MILUS development and implementation so that the final strategy guarantees fair and equitable distribution of housing, conservation, clean energy, and economic development priorities across the Commonwealth and does not concentrate burdens in rural regions without commensurate benefits.
   b. Include clear guidance and financial and technical resources for rural communities that are asked to host state priority land uses—such as public land, drinking water infrastructure, clean energy facilities and data centers.
   c. Develop tools such as a local add-on taxes, rural emergency response infrastructure grants, or outdoor recreation investment grants – that support rural emergency response and stewardship infrastructure in communities that host significant outdoor recreation and clean energy burdens.
   d. Ensure that rural communities are not required to take extra steps to apply for discretionary grants if and when the MILUS prioritized land use conflicts with local priorities.
   e. Allow all rural municipalities to identify appropriate growth centers where further land conservation and clean energy/data center siting will not occur, and prioritize One Stop for Growth and other funding for development of these areas for rural economic and housing growth.

3. **Safeguard rural municipalities from resource-draining clean energy, battery storage and data centers.**
   a. Ensure updates to MassEnviroScreen and the Mass Clean Energy Infrastructure Site Suitability Mapping Tool accurately reflect and consider the conditions in rural communities so that these tools guide an equitable build out of clean energy infrastructure[1].

[1]MassEnviroScreen will be used as a part of Cumulative Impact Assessments for Large Clean Energy Infrastructure Facilities under 980 CMR 15.00, and the Mass Clean Energy Infrastructure Site Suitability Mapping tool will be used for all Small Clean Energy Infrastructure Facilities applying for a Local Consolidated Permit under 225 CMR 29.00.

b. Provide rural municipalities with technical, legal, and planning support to update zoning and bylaws for clean energy, battery storage and data centers ensuring that projects are sited, sized and conditioned to protect public safety, water resources, habitat, and the long-term viability of agriculture and forestry and address noise, traffic, energy demand, climate resilience, tax policy, and community benefit agreements.

c. Provide rural municipalities with support for ongoing monitoring and management of battery storage systems including emergency response equipment and staffing.

d. Create an Office of Rural Negotiation in the Attorney General's Office to provide legal and technical assistance to rural municipalities with limited capacity that are faced with large battery storage or data center development proposals.

e. Encourage regionally coordinated approaches to data-center siting that align with land use, climate, and energy strategies to avoid concentrating environmental and infrastructure burdens in a few rural communities.

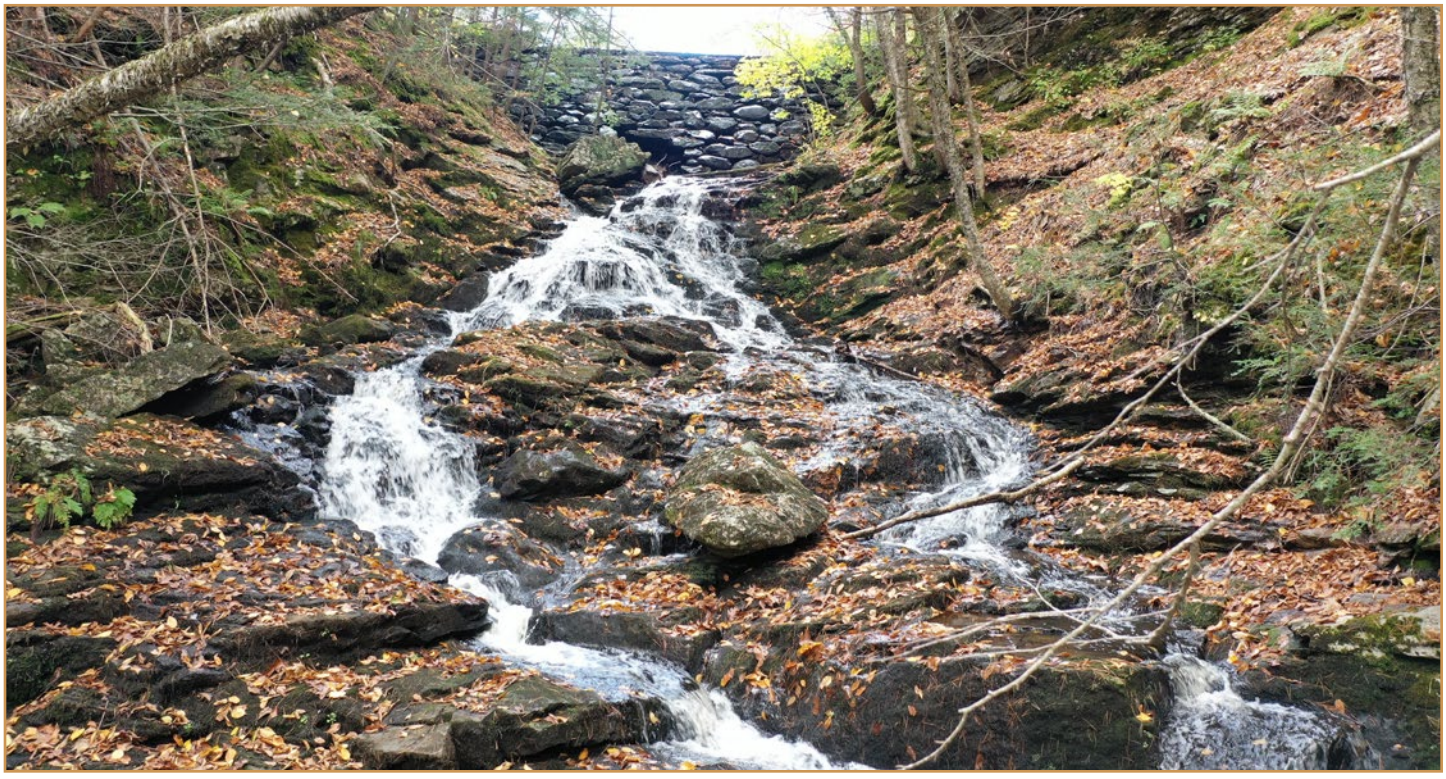
4. Help rural communities with land use planning and climate resiliency.

a. Provide sustained technical and financial assistance to Regional Planning Agencies to help rural municipalities update zoning, subdivision regulations, and comprehensive plans to support compact, mixed-use development in town centers while protecting priority agricultural and forest lands.

b. Support regional planning agencies and conservation partners to lead inland and coastal resilience planning that prioritizes nature-based solutions including wetland and stream restoration, tree planting, and green stormwater infrastructure to reduce flooding and heat exposure; right sizing culverts and small bridges; improvements to water infrastructure so it can withstand future climate conditions; and integrates land use, transportation, and climate adaptation.

c. Monitor and replicate the successes learned from the MDAR-funded Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD), Old Colony Planning Council (OCPC), and Wildlands Trust initiative that is providing technical assistance and resources to municipalities navigating Chapter 61A transitions.

d. Allow multiyear timelines and regional approaches to land use and climate resiliency planning so that towns with limited staff have time to thoroughly consider strategies and impacts and engage stakeholders; encourage zoning reforms that are coordinated across shared geographies such as watersheds, river valleys, and shared transportation corridors.



A stream in Barre.

e. Ensure that implementation of the ResilientMass Finance Strategy and the Mass Ready Act's Resilience Revolving Fund prioritizes rural resilience projects and provides technical assistance, and accessible, low cost financing terms that reflect the limited fiscal and staff capacity of rural communities.

5. Expand technical assistance and support for working lands and climate impacts.

a. Expand technical assistance and financial support for farms and forests adapting to climate change and new markets, including help with diversification, new crops and species, regenerative practices, and succession planning.
   i. Encourage and expand the capacity of the Commonwealth's public and private universities, including UMass Amherst, to engage directly with rural communities and working lands on applied research and technical assistance that supports climate smart agriculture, forestry, and land management.
   ii. Ensure that major earmarks—such as the Future of Food investment at UMass—include concrete partnerships with area farms and food businesses to increase the viability of agriculture and food systems in western and central Massachusetts, not only research or campus focused initiatives.

b. Consistently capitalize the Disaster Relief Fund and related programs so that farmers and rural businesses can recover from microbursts, flooding, drought, and other climate related events without permanently losing productive land or operations.

6. Codify, support and expand the Office of Outdoor Recreation.

a. Codify, sustain and expand the Office of Outdoor Recreation and ensure its programs explicitly benefit rural regions that depend heavily on trails, waterways, forests, and open space for their economies and quality of life.

b. Strengthen collaboration between the Office of Outdoor Recreation, tourism agencies, and economic development entities so investments in outdoor recreation support local business development, workforce opportunities, and infrastructure in nearby village centers.

c. Use federal National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) funds secured by the Massachusetts Broadband Institute or MOTT Capital funds within MassLeads to assist rural municipalities with health, safety, and amenity needs associated with outdoor recreation —including cell coverage on key corridors (including water corridors), restroom and parking facilities, wayfinding, and adequate emergency response capacity.



Cross-country skiing in Windsor.

7. Support the economic potential of agriculture and woodlot management.

a. Provide financial tools such as grants, loans, or revenue bonds for infrastructure that expands the economic potential of agriculture and woodlot management, such as meat and poultry processing, grain and food hubs, and forest products facilities.

b. Expand agricultural and forestry programming and curriculum at Vocational Technical High Schools to ensure that the Commonwealth cultivates a new generation of farmers and foresters.

c. Continue to support and promote MDAR's Farm Pass transition planning program to assist with farmer succession.

MUNICIPAL SUSTAINABILITY



THE MUNICIPAL SUSTAINABILITY GOAL:

Strengthen the long-term sustainability of rural local government by modernizing and diversifying revenues, fixing inequitable state funding formulas, building municipal workforce and volunteer capacity, and expanding practical tools for shared and regional services.

THE MUNICIPAL SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Rural municipalities in Massachusetts are required to deliver the same core services as larger communities but with far fewer people, lower tax bases, and limited staff capacity. Many rural departments consist of a single full- or part-time person who must learn on the job because there is no formal education or training pipeline for many critical municipal roles, and in smaller governments there is often no predecessor or supervisor from whom to learn. Other municipal services are conducted by volunteers including many fire departments in the western half of the state, most made up of 70+ year olds and using facilities that lack current health and safety standards like hazardous materials showers. Limited financial resources translate into lower wages, part-time hours, and minimal benefits, which makes it difficult to recruit and retain employees and volunteers. Rural municipalities with higher median ages (Cape Cod, Berkshire County, Franklin County) are especially vulnerable as a wave of retirements loom in key positions that could lead to a loss of institutional knowledge and continuity, as well as public trust, while simultaneously creating the potential for compliance risks.

At the same time, rural municipalities have constrained and undiversified revenue streams. With little commercial and industrial activity and large shares of tax-exempt or reduced-value land, residential property owners shoulder most of the tax burden, while Proposition 2½ caps and low equalized

Photos: (above) Whately Town Hall; (right) Spencer Town Hall.

values limit the ability to raise additional funds when costs rise faster than revenues. State formulas that rely heavily on population favor more populous municipalities, leaving rural communities struggling to fund education, infrastructure, and core services and operations.

These fiscal and staffing pressures make it difficult for rural towns to keep pace with growing regulatory requirements, mandates, and resident expectations (that may need to be lowered if conditions do not improve). Very small town governments often lack professional knowledge and skills that larger towns take for granted, including grant, contract and fiduciary management, procurement expertise, human resource assistance, etc. Inter-municipal service sharing and regionalization can help maintain or improve service levels (there are strong examples in areas such as public health, education, and emergency response), but designing and implementing shared models takes time and legal and financial expertise, which many small communities lack on their own. Regionalizing municipal services rarely reduces expenses for rural municipalities—it professionalizes services and/or makes service delivery more efficient and consistent but often costs the municipalities more because many services were under-funded before regionalizing.

Some significant progress has occurred since 2019 that have benefited rural municipalities while other gains have waxed and waned. Most notably, Governor Healey appointed a Director of Rural Affairs and created the Rural Development Fund (as part of the Executive Office of Economic Development's One Stop) through Executive Order. Programs valuable to rural municipalities (the Efficiency and Regionalization and Community Compact Programs) were eliminated; Rural School Aid was created in 2019 but decreased in FY26 due to statewide financial challenges; Chapter 90 was increased and new funding was distributed by road miles only, but this change and increased allocation is not codified. Lastly, as this Plan was nearing completion, the Mass Wins Act (economic development bond bill) includes funding and programming for a Municipal Building Authority.

Rural towns need flexible tools to share staff and services, regionally coordinated technical assistance, and revenue structures that recognize their structural disadvantages, higher per-unit costs and their responsibility for stewarding land critical to the state's land use, food security and resiliency goals. Investing in rural municipal sustainability is not just about keeping small town halls open; it is about safeguarding public health and safety, maintaining essential infrastructure, and ensuring that rural residents have access to a baseline level of services comparable to the rest of the Commonwealth.



MUNICIPAL SUSTAINABILITY RECOMMENDATIONS

*In this chapter, recommendations are sorted into three categories: **fiscal sustainability**, **municipal capacity**, and **municipal service sharing**. Items in this chapter are ranked in relative order of import within each section.*

Rural municipalities cannot deliver the same core services with less revenue, fewer staff, and limited administrative capacity indefinitely.

The recommendations are led by **Funding**, **Programming**, and **Legislative** actions: reforming formulas and revenue tools, investing in municipal facilities and regional capacity, building workforce and volunteer pipelines, and modernizing laws that govern local offices and service sharing. Complementary **Policy** and regulatory changes would ensure that state mandates, grant processes, deadlines, and data tools are scaled to rural capacity.

Improve fiscal sustainability and equity for rural municipalities.

1. **Revise state funding formulas that primarily use population for distribution**.
   a. Codify changes to Chapter 90. *See Transportation*.
   b. Increase Rural School Aid and revise Chapter 70 formula to remove factors that skew outliers due to sparse population. *See Education*.
   c. Unrestricted General Government Aid (UGGA), which has not kept up with inflation and rising municipal costs, has no cogent distribution formula. The allocation and amount of UGGA funding needs legislative review and address.[1]

2. **Revise the Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) structure or create a different reimbursement program for state-owned-land.** *See Land Use*.

3. **Eliminate the use of zip codes to distribute state funding.** Due to sparse population density, many rural municipalities share zip codes, which results in over and under counting and inequitable distribution of funding.

4. **Create a Municipal Building Authority and grant/loan fund to assist rural municipalities with technical assistance, municipal building maintenance and construction, including public safety facilities.** Decades of deferred maintenance, driven in part by inequitable state and federal funding formulas, have prevented rural municipalities from implementing capital improvement plans. Rural needs should be prioritized as the program is developed. (Bills to create a Public Safety Building Authority were filed in the 2025-26 legislative session and are currently moving through the legislature.)

5. **Expand and tailor local-option revenue tools so they are usable in rural contexts.**
   a. Existing options tied to meals, hotel rooms, or cannabis sales do not adequately benefit most rural communities; options like the creation of an Outdoor Recreation local option tax could provide more revenue to rural municipalities.

6. **Examine the Commonwealth's tax structures overall to revise how state and local government is funded.** Local property taxes fund an ever-growing share of municipal operations in rural municipalities, despite the regressive nature of property taxation and limits on the revenue that can be raised under Proposition 2½ and within residents' ability to pay.

7. **Revise the prevailing wage law to make wage rates more geographically sensitive and to create exemptions for small projects.** Elimination and revisions to prevailing wage has been a municipal plea since the law was enacted. These compromises are reasonable and fair to both workers and to municipalities

[1] https://www.mma.org/resources/a-perfect-storm-cities-and-towns-face-historic-fiscal-pressures/

Build municipal workforce and leadership capacity; recognize capacity constraints of rural communities.

8. **Establish and permanently resource a rural policy coordination function to advance rural equity across state government.** As noted on page six of this Plan, the creation of a Director of Rural Affairs position within the Executive Office of Economic Development is a welcome and impactful development, yet the position does not have convening authority to work across Secretariats. The Commonwealth should establish a durable rural policy coordination function with authority to convene relevant secretariats and agencies, assess the rural impacts of statewide policies and programs, and coordinate implementation of cross-cutting rural priorities. The function should:
   a. Convene relevant secretariats and agencies on cross-cutting rural issues, including housing, water and wastewater, transportation, education, municipal finance, workforce, health, land use, climate resilience, broadband, and emergency services.
   b. Review major proposed state programs, grant opportunities, regulations, data tools, and implementation schedules for rural eligibility, accessibility, capacity implications, and unintended effects before release.
   c. Identify opportunities to align agency deadlines, match requirements, reporting expectations, and technical-assistance resources so rural municipalities are not forced to choose among important opportunities or excluded by administrative capacity constraints.
   d. Maintain a statewide rural-policy implementation agenda, including measurable priorities, agency responsibilities, timelines, and regular public progress reporting.
   e. Elevate unresolved cross-agency barriers to the Governor's Office and, where appropriate, recommend legislative or budgetary action to the Governor and Legislature.
   f. Establish a recurring mechanism for direct consultation with rural municipal, regional, business, nonprofit, and resident stakeholders across all rural typologies.



Alford Town Offices.

9. **Expand and better coordinate education and training programs for municipal careers, with a focus on roles commonly found in small towns (e.g., clerk, treasurer/collector, accountant, assessor, planner, inspector, public works superintendent, board and commission members).**
   a. Make existing professional association and Division of Local Services trainings more frequent, available online, and open to prospective as well as current local officials.
   b. Provide financial support to rural community colleges to support them in offering credit-bearing and certificate programs in local government management, finance, and regulatory administration that are accessible to rural residents; provide support to vocational technical high schools to offer programs for municipal roles like public works and water and wastewater operation.
   c. Expand financial support for internships, apprenticeships, fellowships, and mentorships in rural municipalities (like the local finance fellowship partnership between the Division of Local Services (DLS) within the Massachusetts Department of Revenue (DOR) and community colleges, and the Massachusetts Municipal Association partnership with Suffolk University that offers graduate-level certificate programs to local government employees) that can place emerging professionals in small towns.



Aerial view of Princeton Town Common.

10. **Recognize and support a culture of service and civic volunteering in rural communities with deliberate efforts to engage residents from diverse ages, backgrounds, and identities in local decision-making.**
    a. Develop statewide and regional campaigns that highlight the importance and impact of serving in local government on boards, commissions, and committees.
    b. Provide simple tools rural towns can use to recruit, orient, and support new volunteers. These could include developing a standardized but adaptable Citizen Academy curriculum and providing information about how to address liability concerns related to local high school students or scout trips offering childcare services at municipal meetings.
    c. Create training programs for volunteers that fill critical municipal roles and need an understanding of Massachusetts regulations and laws.

11. **Simplify the process for converting key local offices from elected to appointed status (Treasurer, Tax Collector and Town Clerk, among others) so that towns can establish minimum qualifications, broaden candidate pools, and more easily share positions across municipalities when appropriate.**

12. **Expand and codify retiree work limitations for hard-to-fill municipal roles.**
    a. Codify retiree work limitations for hard-to fill municipal roles. Allow experienced staff to work more hours in critical positions while longer-term workforce pipelines are being built. (This is built into the Municipal Empowerment Act.)
    b. Expand elder property tax deferrals and senior work off programs.
    c. Pursue amendment of the Massachusetts Labor Displacement Prohibition regulations that currently prohibit volunteers from filling municipal roles.

Expand inter-municipal and regional service delivery.

13. **Explore structural options to sustain local governance in fiscally strained rural areas.**
    a. Fund a multiyear, state and local research and planning effort to assess models such as voluntary town mergers, the creation of full municipal districts (where multiple towns retain their names and civic identities but operate under a single consolidated local government for all core services) and the reinstatement or expansion of county wide service departments through existing county governments, Council of Governments and/or Regional Planning Agencies, so that rural communities can reliably fund and provide essential services over the long term.
    b. Revise Chapter 40B, legislation that created Regional Planning Agencies, to broaden their scope and authorities.
    c. Provide technical assistance and funding for a pilot town merger project between two or more willing and interested rural municipalities.

14. **Reestablish and strengthen multi-year Efficiency and Regionalization grant and technical assistance programs that support the planning, design, startup, and early operation of shared services.**

15. **Incentivize and support targeted reforms in emergency services staffing to promote regional models for police, EMS and fire where call and volunteer systems are no longer sustainable.**
    a. Create multi-year grants or funding mechanisms (see above).
    b. Work with the Massachusetts Insurance Commission to adjust the rubric used by insurance companies to evaluate homeowner access to fire response. Current thresholds prevent fire regionalization even though call fire departments could have a slower response time than staffed departments further away.
    c. Work with Department of Public Health (DPH) Office of Emergency Medical Services (OEMS) to develop a rural Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) response model that promotes and financially supports regionalized response in rural regions.



A paramedic serving the Town of Colrain participates in an operational exercise.

16. **Provide Regional Planning Agencies and county governments that serve rural municipalities with non-competitive and consistent funding to allow them to provide more service to rural municipalities and make county governments eligible for more state grant opportunities.**

17. **Help rural municipalities evaluate and, where appropriate, jointly procure private vendors for specialized municipal services** (such as financial management, assessing, or certain IT functions), using collective buying power and shared oversight to improve service quality and cost-effectiveness without overburdening local staff.

PUBLIC HEALTH



THE PUBLIC HEALTH GOAL:

Ensure rural residents have equitable access to strong public health and health care systems by sustaining local and regional capacity and using new federal and state resources to close long-standing gaps in access, outcomes, and preparedness.

THE PUBLIC HEALTH CHALLENGE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Since 2019, Massachusetts has made significant progress in improving rural public health and health care systems. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed critical weaknesses—fragmented local public health capacity, uneven preparedness, and limited integration with health care systems—but also led to rapid learning, new partnerships, and sustained reforms. Local boards of health, regional planning agencies, health systems, and community organizations in rural regions worked together on testing, contact tracing, vaccination, and communication, demonstrating the value of shared services and regional infrastructure when individual town departments are too small to respond alone.

The subsequent passage and implementation of SAPHE 2.0 (State Action for Public Health Excellence) has begun to standardize foundational public health capabilities across municipalities, encourage regionalization, and increase state support for shared public health services—steps that are especially

Photos: (above) A Franklin County Regional Public Health Nurse provides on-site care at a senior housing site; (right) FRCOG CPHS Public Health Nurse Lisa White, Senator Jo Comerford, Bernardston Board of Health member Barbara Killeen, FRCOG CPHS Program Manager Randy Crochier, FRCOG Director of Community Health Phoebe Walker, Director of MA DPH Office of Local and Regional Health Sam Wong, MA Director of Health Policy and Strategic Initiatives Eliza Lake, MA DPH Commissioner Robbie Goldstein, and MA Executive Office of Health and Human Services Secretary Kiame Mahania at a visit to Gill Town Hall to discuss the regional work made possible through DPH Public Health Excellence grants.

important for rural communities with limited staff and budgets. Nearly every rural health department in the Commonwealth is now part of a regional public health collaborative funded by the Massachusetts DPH Public Health Excellence (PHE) program. This investment has dramatically improved the quality of public health protections for rural residents, and has made public health an important rural economic contributor.

In early 2026, the Commonwealth secured a major Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) award from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) that is intended not only to stabilize rural health care, but to transform it. Through this program, Massachusetts has committed to ensure that rural residents can more readily access services, create more opportunities to improve health and well-being, and scale systems, policies, and investments that reflect rural communities' unique needs. Planned activities include expanding preventive and community-based care, supporting new care and payment models, upgrading facilities and technology, strengthening the rural health workforce, and bringing all rural health entities onto interoperable data-sharing platforms by the end of the five-year program in 2031. Bolstering the ability to measure progress on the Plan's public health recommendations is the Massachusetts Health Data Tool, which provides granular data about rural health indicators. DPH's rural framework, which distinguishes Rural Levels 1 and 2 and establishes 18 rural clusters of communities for data analysis, recognizes that rural communities differ and offers additional tools for understanding those differences and tailoring public health investments.

Despite this progress and new investment, rural Massachusetts still faces significant public health and health care challenges. Increased public health funding brought heightened expectations for all health departments. Rural providers and public health entities are being asked to participate in value-based and population-health initiatives, adopt new technologies and telehealth models, integrate into statewide data systems, and engage in regional partnerships all while managing day-to-day operations with limited administrative capacity and while serving a sparse and large geographic area where people and businesses are farther apart with limited transportation options.

Rural residents often travel long distances for primary care, emergency services, specialty care, and behavioral health, and small hospitals and clinics remain financially fragile. Rural behavioral health systems in particular struggle with funding



and staffing even as demand for services related to mental health, substance use, and an aging population remains high. Rural Emergency Medical Services are reaching a crisis point: many rural EMS services are volunteer based, existing volunteers are aging, and fewer people are volunteering (in part because fewer people live and work in the same town, so volunteering is more difficult). A unique rural challenge are Regional Transit Authority (RTA) rules that prohibit demand-response rides to medical appointments beyond an RTA's boundary. For the RTAs, this rule is practical because it prevents a vehicle and a driver being taken out of commission for the better part of a day for one patient's needs. In rural regions where medical specialists are often unavailable and appointments beyond a rural RTA's boundaries are the only option, patients with no other transportation option are stranded.

In recent years, opioid settlement funds began to flow into cities and towns across the nation. Unfortunately, the national settlement formula is skewed against municipalities in regional school districts because of the data used in developing the formula. This has left some of the towns with the highest opioid overdose rates receiving the least settlement funding per capita, while wealthier towns with local schools receive ten times what their neighbors do. Although the national formula cannot be changed, 60% of the settlement funds stay at the state level, which is where this disparity can be addressed. Given the high rates of substance use disorder in rural communities, DPH should also make flexible funding available for prevention and treatment beyond opioid settlement funds.

The Public Health Excellence (PHE) Program, described above, that has transformed rural public health delivery currently relies on federal funds that are running out. Significant, stable state funding is required to ensure that the gains made since COVID-19 are not lost.

Without careful attention to capacity, equity, and local context, and aligning rural health and public health investments with transportation, broadband and digital equity, housing, age-friendly initiatives, and climate-resilience efforts there is a risk that the benefits of these reforms and investments will flow primarily to better-resourced organizations or regions, leaving the most isolated and economically distressed rural communities behind. The rural public health agenda in this Plan seeks to align with the SAPHE 2.0 and RHTP frameworks and ensure that systems transformation is designed and implemented in ways that are achievable for all rural communities and that recognize the needs of rural residents.



Staff and stakeholders of the West County Senior Services District serving Ashfield, Buckland, and Shelburne, the first of its kind in the Commonwealth.

PUBLIC HEALTH RECOMMENDATIONS

Rural health transformation must strengthen local access and capacity, not shift new responsibilities onto already stretched systems.

The recommendations are led by **Funding**, **Programming**, and **Policy** actions: sustaining SAPHE 2.0 and expanding rural care, prevention, workforce, and emergency-response models; directing resources fairly; and ensuring that standards, regional structures, and technology investments reflect rural distance, capacity, and service needs.

1. **Ensure rural representation and rural equity in the rollout of SAPHE 2.0, the Rural Health Transformation Program, and the expending of state opioid settlement funds**.
   a. Prioritize the continuation of SAPHE 2.0 advancements in local public health training and staffing (including the PHE Grant Program) by increasing state investment in SAPHE 2.0 to $50m from a sustained and predictable state funding source beginning in FY28, when current federal funds are spent out.
   b. Ensure strong rural representation on the revived Special Commission on Local and Regional Health, which is tasked with updating workforce credential requirements and performance standards, and recommending funding strategies.
   c. Ensure strong representation from the MA Health Data Tool's Rural Level 1 and 2 communities in the proposed RHTP advisory and workgroup structure so that program design and implementation reflect the realities of all kinds of rural communities.
   d. Prioritize a rural carve-out or target percentage in state funding for opioid use disorder prevention, harm reduction, treatment and recovery services funded by the national opioid settlement. Additional state investments in rural communities will address the gap created by the national formula, which compounds their infrastructure challenges.
   e. Incentivize regional efforts for opioid settlement programming and services.

2. **Use RHTP to stabilize and expand core rural health services.**
   a. Direct a significant share of RHTP funding to sustaining and expanding access to essential services in rural areas—primary care, urgent and emergency care, EMS (including restoration of funding to regional EMS Councils), Mobile Integrated Health (MIH), behavioral health, dental care, and maternal and child health—through facility upgrades, Community Paramedicine, mobile or hub-and-spoke models, and strengthened hospitals and health centers.
   b. Track and improve access measures such as drive time and transportation supports to key



Tick safety education at a community event in Heath.

services and availability of mobile or visiting providers, and prioritize investments that bring care closer to residents rather than relying solely on regional consolidation.

c. Rethink and implement a revision to RTA rules regarding medical transportation that balances the capacity constraints of rural RTA vehicles and drivers with the reality that rural patients are often required to go beyond a rural RTA boundary for specialist care due to lack of medical professionals in rural regions.

3. Invest in prevention, community partnerships, and social drivers of health.

a. Dedicate a meaningful portion of RHTP and related resources to community-based prevention and community health improvement planning that address aging and dementia needs; mental health; substance use; food security; chronic disease; injury prevention; social connectedness; and other social drivers of health in rural communities, using approaches such as school-based programs, regional collective impact coalitions, and cross-sector partnerships.

b. Leverage PHE program staff and training infrastructure as well as RHTP investments to strengthen rural health emergency preparedness and response capacity, including training, regional coordination, and surge planning for public health emergencies, natural disasters, and other events that can disproportionately strain small systems.

c. Ensure that implementation of the RHTP and continuation of the PHE program are accompanied by funding and capacity increases commensurate with any new standards, expectations, or regionalization efforts, so rural public health entities are not simply handed additional responsibilities without the resources to meet them.

4. Build a stronger rural health and public health workforce pipeline to improve rural health outcomes and to strengthen the rural workforce and economy.

a. Develop "grow-your-own" workforce pathways by partnering with community colleges, vocational and technical schools, high schools, elder services organizations, and MassHire to



A skater and her dog at Windsor Lake.



Regional inspectors from the South Central Mass Partnership for Public Health conducting inspections at the Brimfield Fair.

provide local training, clinical rotations, and laddered credentials that prepare rural residents for health and public health careers without requiring relocation.

b. Implement the 2026 MA DPH Office of Local and Regional Health's Local Public Health Academy Strategic Plan in a way that assures geographic equity and access.

c. Use new statewide SAPHE 2.0 annual municipal and workforce survey data to inform future training.

5. **Support targeted reforms in emergency services staffing to promote regional models for EMS, fire, and police where call and volunteer systems are no longer sustainable.** *See Municipal Sustainability.*

6. **Strengthen rural, regional public health service delivery through DPH's consistent distribution of funds.** The MA Department of Public Health uses different regional configurations to distribute its funding for emergency preparedness, tobacco control, chronic disease reduction, and Public Health Excellence grants, and distributes other funding by municipality, like Opioid settlement funds. Public health service delivery would be improved and more efficient if DPH settled on a single definition of "region" such as by county boundaries (especially in areas where county governments still exists).

7. **Expand telehealth and digital tools while preserving in-person options.**

a. Promote telehealth, remote monitoring, and digital triage tools that are specifically designed to function in rural broadband environments and on a range of devices, including smartphones, while aligning them with privacy and security standards.

b. Ensure that telehealth expansion under RHTP complements, rather than replaces, in-person services for residents with limited connectivity, digital literacy, or private space, and coordinate with broadband and digital equity initiatives described elsewhere in this Plan.

TECHNOLOGY, BROADBAND, AND DIGITAL RESILIENCE



THE TECHNOLOGY GOAL:

Ensure rural communities have the broadband, mobile connectivity, and IT capacity they need to participate fully in the digital economy while protecting equity, resilience, and local control.

THE TECHNOLOGY CHALLENGE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Since 2019, Massachusetts has made major strides in closing basic connectivity gaps in rural areas. State, federal, and local investments—building on the MassBroadband 123 middle-mile network and the Last Mile program—have extended fiber-to-the-home or cable broadband to nearly all previously unserved communities and brought the Commonwealth to over 99 percent broadband availability, far above the national average. The Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) now organizes this work into three phases: middle- and last-mile deployment through 2021; a 2021–2026 focus on digital equity, gap networks, residential retrofits, devices, and Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) implementation; and a new phase that focuses on Massachusetts achieving seamless connectivity to empower residents to thrive in a digital society that is being shaped by rapidly evolving AI applications and tools. Other progress has been made as communities throughout the Commonwealth developed Digital Equity Plans to address device access, digital skills, and affordability so that rural residents can meaningfully use the connections now available.

Despite this progress, rural communities face persistent and evolving challenges. Areas on the Outer Cape, recognized in the 2019 Plan, continue to have inadequate bandwidth during peak summer

Photos: (above) Spools of fiber-optic cable building out the western Massachusetts fiber network; (right) a tongue-in-cheek co-workspace outside of the New Salem WIFI-equipped library during COVID, as this was the only location in town with broadband access.

tourism season. In some municipal fiber towns, some households did not opt in during the initial build-out, often because of up-front connection costs or limited awareness of benefits, and many other rural residents still rely on aging cable lines with limited upload capacity. The effectiveness of low earth orbit satellite and fixed wireless networks, solutions used by some rural municipalities, remains unclear. While MBI is expanding broadband access to more than 7,800 homes and businesses through their Gap Networks Grant Program and BEAD Deployment Grant Program, there are still unserved or underserved locations that may remain without a solution due to ongoing issues with the accuracy of the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) National Broadband Map.

Affordability remains a barrier as rural incomes lag statewide averages and many areas are effectively served by a single wireline provider, limiting price competition; the sunset of major federal affordability programs has left a gap for low- and moderate-income households even as online participation has become essential for work, education, health, and civic life. Public WiFi is sparse because many rural towns have few libraries or civic facilities and limited resources to equip those they do have, leaving residents without reliable places to connect when home access is unaffordable or unreliable.

Mobile service remains uneven. The 2019 Rural Policy Plan highlighted the lack of reliable cell coverage and called for a comprehensive assessment of rural service gaps. Since then, state agencies have begun mapping gaps and exploring options to improve coverage, but many rural residents, visitors, and businesses still encounter "no-service" zones, dropped calls, and weak mobile data. Older zoning bylaws that were adopted decades ago to limit or discourage cell towers as visual blights now constrain infrastructure expansion and must be revisited to balance aesthetic concerns with current safety and economic needs. In an era when emergency communication, navigation, and basic commerce assume mobile connectivity, the lack of dependable coverage has become a deterrent to residents and businesses considering rural locations and a growing liability for tourism-dependent communities.

At the same time, rural municipalities and institutions are increasingly exposed to cybersecurity and IT risks without commensurate capacity. The Commonwealth



has strengthened its overall cybersecurity posture through the creation of the Mass Cyber Center and CyberTrust Massachusetts, expansion of the Community Compact IT grant program, and continued build-out of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Interoperable Radio System (CoMIRS) emergency communications system into rural regions. Yet many small towns still have no dedicated IT staff, rely on part-time vendors, and lack the funding and expertise to implement basic security controls, user training, and incident response plans, even as they digitize financial, public safety, and permitting systems. Cybersecurity is rarely viewed as "critical infrastructure" on par with roads, water, or schools, leaving rural governments disproportionately vulnerable to ransomware, data loss, and service disruptions that they are ill-equipped to manage.

Finally, rural communities are being asked to navigate a rapidly changing technology landscape that includes AI, cloud computing, and large data centers with limited staff and planning capacity. AI-enabled tools and data-sharing requirements are beginning to shape how local governments, schools, health systems, and employers operate, while at the same time there is concern that rural areas—with relatively inexpensive land, constrained oversight capacity, and limited bargaining power—could become default locations for energy- and water-intensive data centers. Most rural bylaws and comprehensive plans do not yet address the siting and regulation of data-intensive facilities or provide guidance on responsible municipal use of AI, leaving towns reactive rather than proactive as proposals and tools emerge. Without deliberate support for planning, governance, and community engagement, there is a risk that new technologies will deepen existing inequities—benefiting well-resourced organizations and regions—while rural communities shoulder disproportionate environmental, fiscal, or security risks and struggle to realize the potential of the digital transition.

A significant portion of the federal broadband and digital equity funding allocated to Massachusetts under the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) must be expended by the end of 2026. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) enacted substantial changes to the BEAD program administered in 2025 that included eliminating the fiber preference in favor of a technology neutral approach. The NTIA has yet to issue a policy notice for the remaining BEAD funding that is not committed to deployment projects. In Massachusetts, this amounts to more than $100 million.



Surveyors leveling the ground to build a central electronics hub for the Town of Shutesbury's municipally-owned fiber-optic network.

TECHNOLOGY RECOMMENDATIONS

Reliable, affordable connectivity and local digital capacity are now essential rural infrastructure.

The recommendations are led by **Funding**, **Policy**, and **Programming** actions: investing in broadband, mobile coverage, cybersecurity, and digital-equity access; updating rules and planning frameworks; and providing the training, technical assistance, and shared-service models rural communities need to use technology safely and effectively. Targeted **Legislative** action would support a statewide Digital Navigator credential.

1. **Complete universal broadband access.**
   a. Use state bond funds to close remaining "last mile" and gap areas in rural regions, prioritizing solutions that meet or exceed broadband standards and avoid long-term reliance on satellite for year-round residents.
   b. Establish a targeted, one-time rural connection "drop" fund to help households and small businesses cover the cost of connecting from the road to the premises in towns served by municipal fiber, other Fiber to the Home networks, and cable networks, especially where residents did not opt in during initial build-out because of up-front costs.
   c. Create a state-level affordability program modeled on the former Affordable Connectivity Program to provide monthly broadband discounts for low- and moderate-income rural households and explore open-access or other models that increase competition and transparency in rural markets.
   d. Broaden 220 CMR 45.00 to address barriers to broadband expansion and competition resulting from the current make-ready process in Massachusetts. The Department of Telecommunications and Cable and the Department of Public Utilities should promulgate final regulations through the current joint proceeding to adopt one touch make ready, self help remedies and strict timelines for each phase of the make-ready process.

2. **Treat cybersecurity capacity as critical rural infrastructure.**
   a. Expand and specifically target and fund the Community Compact IT Grant Program, and CyberTrust MA and Mass Cyber Center initiatives to support baseline security tools, backups, and upgrades in rural towns that have no IT capacity, including integration with CoMIRS and other emergency communication systems.
   b. Develop simple, tiered cybersecurity standards and implementation guides tailored to small municipalities, and link grant eligibility and cyber insurance to adoption of basic practices such as multifactor authentication, regular backups, patch management, and phishing training.



Fiber-optic cable being laid in Shutesbury.

3. **Treat municipal IT capacity as critical rural infrastructure.**
   a. Explicitly recognize municipal IT systems, public safety communications, and essential local applications as critical infrastructure in state policy and funding frameworks, and prioritize rural municipalities for cyber readiness grants and technical assistance.
   b. Support regionalized IT services —through RPAs, councils of governments, or multi-town consortia—that can provide shared staff for multiple rural communities that cannot sustain full-time in-house IT departments.

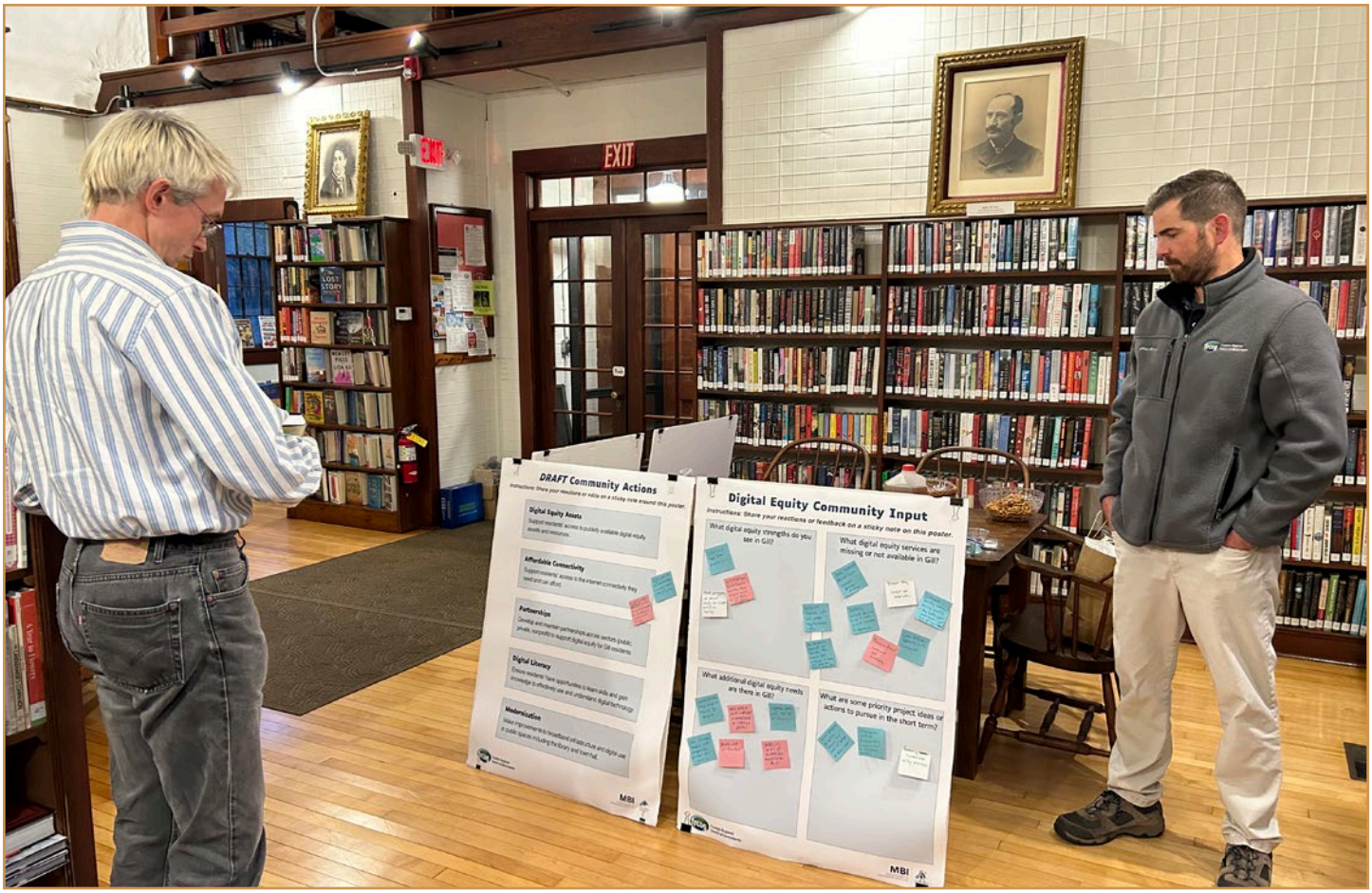
4. **Plan proactively for data-intensive infrastructure, including large data centers.** *See Land Use*.

5. **Support and implement rural Digital Equity Plans that bundle device distribution, digital literacy, and outreach, using libraries, senior centers, schools, and regional hubs as primary delivery sites.**
   a. Fund the reopening of MBI's Municipal Digital Equity Planning and Implementation Programs.
   b. Advance H.100 "An Act establishing a commission to study a statewide credentialing program for digital navigators". Develop a statewide standard credential for Digital Navigators (a Digital Navigator is a trained guide who helps community members, especially the elderly, access affordable internet, obtain devices, and build essential digital skills).
   c. Promote rural access to digital skills programs such as "Grow with Google" and similar initiatives through libraries, schools, workforce boards, and community organizations, tying these efforts to broadband, device access, and local industry needs.

6. **Improve rural mobile coverage and integrate communications into core infrastructure planning.**
   a. Provide model bylaws and technical assistance so rural municipalities can modernize zoning that currently restricts or effectively bans cell



Dickinson Library in Whately.



Municipal and regional planning agency staff preparing for a digital equity community planning meeting in Gill.

infrastructure, balancing visual concerns with current safety and economic needs. Prioritize efforts along utility corridors to expedite coverage expansion.

b. Commission and regularly update a detailed rural cell coverage and performance map to identify "no-service" and "weak-service" areas and guide state, federal, and private investments.

c. Use NTIA, MassWorks, MassLeads, and related programs to fund new or upgraded cell sites, shared towers, and hybrid WiFi/cellular solutions in rural village centers, outdoor recreation areas, and along key evacuation and emergency corridors.

d. Encourage co-location of telecommunications infrastructure with transportation, broadband, and energy projects—such as along state highways, rail corridors, and utility rights-of-way—to reduce cost and environmental impacts.

e. Leverage the MassBroadband 123 middle mile network to build fiber to the tower infrastructure for new tower sites.

7. Align emerging technologies—including Artificial Intelligence (AI)—with rural capacity, equity, and local control.

a. Develop statewide guidance and model policies and governance frameworks for ethical and responsible municipal and regional use of AI and automation, covering transparency, bias, privacy, procurement, and human oversight, with specific attention to the needs and constraints of rural governments.

b. Provide training and technical assistance to help rural officials, schools, and regional entities identify appropriate, high-value uses of AI (such as grant support, document drafting, and customer service) while safeguarding against over-reliance or inequitable impacts.

c. Ensure that new data-sharing or technology requirements linked to health, education, or public administration initiatives include funding and capacity-building for rural entities, so small organizations can participate without being overburdened.

TRANSPORTATION



THE TRANSPORTATION GOAL:

Secure stable, codified funding and programs that reflect rural conditions so rural Massachusetts has climate-resilient, safe transportation systems that provide reliable mobility and protect critical infrastructure.

THE TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Since the 2019 Rural Policy Plan, rural advocates and partners have made notable progress in educating the Legislature, the Governor's administration, and MassDOT about the distinct transportation needs of rural communities. Rural municipalities continue to face systemic barriers: funding formulas that rely heavily on population; large shares of highly vulnerable unpaved roads; aging and expensive culvert infrastructure with no standardized design; limited local capacity to navigate complex design and permitting requirements; transit and passenger rail models that were designed for denser, urbanized regions; and safety measures that often do not address the challenges of rural roads (low lighting, sharp curves, more rugged and varying topography, higher travel speeds on lower-volume rural connectors, and longer emergency response times).

Public transportation in rural areas requires more flexible and demand-responsive service designs than traditional fixed-route systems, while passenger rail expansion in western and other rural parts of the state struggles to meet federal cost-benefit tests

Photos: (above) the intersection of Bridge Street and State Street in Shelburne Falls; (right) members of the Franklin County legislative delegation celebrate Governor Healey's announcement of fare-free regional transit.

despite evidence of unmet demand. These challenges intersect with climate change, which is increasing the frequency and severity of storm events that cause rapid and severe flooding and damage roads, bridges, and small structures. At the same time, the transition to electric vehicles risks leaving rural residents behind if charging infrastructure continues to concentrate in more urbanized areas, making it difficult for rural households, workers, and visitors to rely on EVs for everyday travel.

Since 2019, several new funding streams and initiatives have begun to address these issues, many supported by Fair Share revenue dedicated to education and transportation. In FY26, the Chapter 90 program was increased to $300 million, including $100 million distributed by road miles only. This distribution method significantly boosted allocations for many rural communities and partially corrected long-standing inequities for municipalities with extensive local road networks. Fair Share dollars have also supported a $7 million pilot Unpaved Roads Grant Program, and culvert and small bridge funding has been increased by approximately $200 million, better reflecting the outsized role these assets play in rural resilience.

At the same time, rural Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs) and community partners have leveraged legislative earmarks, MassDOT discretionary grants, health care system investments, private donations, and philanthropic support to pilot and scale microtransit and other flexible services to reach communities never previously served by public transit. Additionally, transit is currently fare-free through existing legislation which further supports rural communities. The MassDOT Compass Rail planning effort acknowledges the need for expanded west-east passenger rail service. Feasibility and economic impact studies for the Northern Tier corridor illustrate growing recognition of rural rail opportunities, while intercity bus investments and multimodal improvements (such as bike racks on buses, shared mobility programs, and Complete Streets projects) have incrementally improved rural connectivity. A multimodal transportation system that links rural, suburban and urban places enhances economic activity, equity and social inclusion, public health and safety, and environmental sustainability for all communities in the Commonwealth.

These gains represent significant advocacy wins for rural Massachusetts, but most of the new funding and programs remain time-limited, pilot-oriented, or subject to annual budget decisions rather than being permanently codified in statute. Changes in state budget priorities, Fair Share revenue yields, or federal funding rules could slow or reverse progress, underscoring the need for durable formulas, statutory commitments, and streamlined project delivery tailored to rural conditions.



TRANSPORTATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Rural transportation needs stable commitments.

The recommendations are led by **Funding** and **Legislative** actions: securing and codifying equitable Chapter 90 and unpaved-road funding, sustaining rural infrastructure and multimodal investments, and protecting rural communities as transportation revenue systems evolve. Complementary **Policy** and **Programming** actions would streamline project delivery, strengthen technical capacity, and expand flexible transit and safety solutions.

1. **Permanently increase Chapter 90 funding to at least $300 million annually; index all future allocations to inflation; and codify the municipal distribution formula of any funding above $200 million based on road miles only**. This approach would preserve the traditional population-and-employment-based formula for the base allocation while ensuring that increases meaningfully address decades of underinvestment in rural road networks and keep pace with rising construction and materials cost and effects of increasingly severe storm events.

2. **Maintain, increase and create new funding for uniquely rural transportation challenges.**
   a. Codify and expand the Unpaved Roads Grant Program. Because distribution of Chapter 90 has been so inadequate, rural municipalities have never had resources for proper full-depth reconstruction of unpaved roads, which are needed every 20 years just like paved roads. As a result, these roads are increasingly susceptible to storm damage and variable weather conditions.
   b. Maintain increased funding for Small Bridges and Community Culvert Grant Programs.
   c. Expand funding for rural shared roads and paths to provide needed transportation alternatives to rural residents and to encourage greater visitation to rural areas.
   d. Invest in rural electric vehicle (EV) fast-charging infrastructure as part of core transportation systems. Prioritize state and utility funding for public and semi-public EV charging stations in rural communities—such as village centers, park-and-ride lots, and key destinations—so that rural residents, workers, and visitors can reliably adopt EVs without facing range anxiety or long detours for charging.

3. **Recognize the capacity constraints of rural municipalities and direct state agencies to provide technical assistance and/or simplify, streamline and standardize design, permitting and approval processes for transportation projects.**
   a. Direct MassDOT and the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to work together to streamline the project design,



A washed-out unpaved road in Ashfield.

permitting and approval process for small bridges and culverts. The regulatory process for small stream crossing replacements is especially burdensome for under-resourced rural communities, delaying projects that are critical for public safety, ecological health, and climate resilience; coordinated reforms should simplify requirements, improve transparency, provide standardized designs for specific culvert types and shorten timelines to construction (that also has the benefit of minimizing inflation-based price escalation) while maintaining environmental protections.

b. Expand and institutionalize funding assistance for project development and engineering for rural roads. Programs such as MassDOT's Local Early and Actionable Planning (LEAP) initiative, which provides needed and appreciated technical and pre-construction support to rural municipalities and Gateway Cities, should be made permanent, scaled beyond the initial three-year, $1 million-per-year structure, and complemented by similar capacity-building tools to ensure that rural communities can plan, design, and deliver projects that leverage state and federal funds.

4. **Continue to support, expand and enhance community transit, microtransit and other flexible services provided by rural RTAs and local partners.**
   a. Smaller vehicles, on-demand and demand-response scheduling, and cross-sector partnerships are often the most effective way to serve dispersed populations and older adults and complement traditional fixed-route services where they exist.
   b. Ensure that rural RTAs develop and implement a microtransit plan that expands transportation options in rural regions and that the work of and funding to Community Transit Providers and Neighbors groups are complementing and expanding RTA services so that Commonwealth resources are used efficiently and effectively.
   c. Create Park and Ride lots in areas already served by fixed route and microtransit to expand opportunities for transit use.

5. **Provide efficient and reliable passenger rail, intercity bus service and other multi-modal connections linking rural areas to one another and to urban centers.** Multi-modal interconnectivity benefits all areas of the Commonwealth but are often ambitious and expensive projects. In the current state and federal financial and political climate, it would be easy to give up on these projects but they should remain a high priority for the Commonwealth.



West Brookfield Town Center.

6. **Include rural roadway safety in the statewide Strategic Highway Safety Plan.** According to the MassDOT web site, an update of that plan is underway. Rural stakeholders, if not already included, should be included in the assessment and planning process to ensure that rural safety issues are understood and addressed, perhaps through the formation of a rural safety subcommittee.

7. **As the Commonwealth considers an alternative to the gas tax to generate adequate revenue for future transportation safety and maintenance, like congestion pricing and/or vehicle miles traveled (VMT), rural impacts should be carefully examined to ensure fairness and equity for all residents.**

WATER AND WASTEWATER



THE WATER AND WASTEWATER GOAL:

Ensure rural communities have reliable, affordable drinking water and wastewater systems that support residents, enable appropriate housing and economic development, and protect environmental and public health in a changing climate.

THE WATER AND WASTEWATER CHALLENGE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Despite clear needs and strong recommendations in the 2019 Rural Policy Plan, rural water and wastewater conditions have seen limited improvement in most regions of Massachusetts. Progress has been constrained by local capacity limits, complex regulatory requirements, and the absence of new, dedicated state resources at the scale required to implement recommended solutions. Further exacerbating these issues are a nearly two-year drought that is depleting private, local and state water supplies, the impact of climate-related severe storms that stress the capacity of stormwater systems and the goal of building 220,000 new housing units throughout Massachusetts that will also need water and wastewater services.

These challenges are particularly acute in small systems and in unserved towns that lack professional staff and have difficulty competing for funding, engineering support, and operator time. Rural communities continue to rely heavily on private wells and septic systems, which are expensive to build and upgrade, require suitable soils and topography, and can limit housing and small business development (many of these communities will realistically never have public water and wastewater systems). In village centers and commercial clusters, business growth can trigger thresholds that convert private wells into public water supplies, yet the transition process

Photos: (above) a view of the Quabbin Reservoir from New Salem; (right) a regional health agent conducts a perc test in Hawley.

remains time-consuming, opaque, and difficult to navigate for small owners with limited technical capacity. Small public water suppliers and districts face aging infrastructure, Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS) and salt contamination risk, drought conditions that are reducing the water supply, burdensome regulatory requirements, and serious workforce shortages, all within very small ratepayer bases that make it hard to raise the revenues needed for system replacement and resiliency investments.

Since 2019, rural stakeholders and DEP staff have begun constructive conversations about practical adjustments to Title 5, small public water supply regulation, and small-scale treatment plant permitting that could better support accessory dwelling units (ADUs), shared systems, and village-scale development while maintaining public health protections. These discussions underscore that regulatory frameworks designed for higher-density or larger systems can unintentionally create barriers in low-density rural settings, especially where demographics are aging, and household sizes are shrinking. The Massachusetts Affordable Homes Act determined that Title 5 regulations will not impede housing development; yet the Act's recognition of Title 5 as a permissible regulatory framework does not resolve whether some requirements are reasonable and affordable in rural practice. The state should consider changes to the regulations that continue to protect environmentally sensitive resources while also reducing the cost of Title 5-required improvements.

Rural water and sewer districts have also highlighted the importance of technical assistance to assist volunteer municipal district boards who may not have sufficient subject matter expertise. Similarly, there is a need for regional operator-sharing, and streamlined guidance to help small communities implement innovative/alternative technologies and maintain compliance without overburdening volunteers and part-time staff.

Some progress has been made in expanding training and support for small system operators, including a short-lived UMass program that provided rural-focused technical assistance before its funding ended. In addition, current rules allow one operator to cover multiple small systems within a 100-mile radius, but this distance can still be limiting in large, sparsely populated regions, where a larger geographic radius would better reflect rural conditions.

The water from the Wachusett and Quabbin Reservoirs managed by the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) is being relied on to fuel housing



expansion in eastern Massachusetts but currently provides little benefit to the municipalities that house and protect this rich water resource or to other communities west of the reservoirs. Ironically, the Town of New Salem that has 91% of its land area within the protected Quabbin Reservoir, has intermittent interruptions to use of its Town Hall Annex because the building's private well periodically goes dry. Despite being within eyesight of the Quabbin, the Town has no access to this water resource. And because so much of the town is permanently conserved for the Quabbin's protection, the Town has limited ability to raise revenue to cover expenses of repairing or replacing the well.

This phenomenon is not contained to the Quabbin system. Many rural towns house water reservoirs within their borders for neighboring larger cities and towns but have no access to these water sources as their private wells dry up, have too little water to fight fires, or are facing PFAS contamination.

The revenue generation formula used by nearly all municipal systems and the MWRA is based on water usage, which results in a disincentive for these systems to encourage water conservation. An example of this is the that MWRA has not mandated water restrictions to any of the communities it serves, and the Quabbin Reservoir is ten feet below its average levels. Between PFAS contamination, an ongoing drought and limited conservation efforts, there are growing signs that, as a Commonwealth, we are not adequately acknowledging how critical and finite clean water availability is, are over-relying on the Quabbin system to fuel housing growth and are creating a new inequity of haves and have nots between rural communities that rely on private wells and larger cities and regions that currently have unlimited access to water.

Water and wastewater challenges intersect directly with climate resiliency, housing, economic development, and public health in rural areas. Without new, sustained investment and flexible, rural-appropriate regulatory tools, communities will struggle to replace leaking mains, address unaccounted-for water, respond to drought, climate change and contamination threats, and provide the infrastructure needed to support compact village development and the working lands economy. This chapter therefore renews the 2019 vision and identifies specific, achievable steps for DEP, partner agencies, and rural communities to work together on incremental but meaningful progress.



Lake Wickaboag in West Brookfield.

WATER AND WASTEWATER RECOMMENDATIONS

Reliable water and wastewater systems are foundational to rural public health, housing, economic development, and climate resilience.

The recommendations are led by **Funding**, **Policy**, and **Programming** actions: creating dedicated rural infrastructure support, updating rules and planning practices for small and decentralized systems, and building the technical, operator, and regional capacity needed to sustain them. Targeted **Legislative** action would modernize the governance tools available to rural water and sewer districts.

1. **Integrate water/sewer policy and action with housing, economic development, and climate resiliency initiatives.**
   a. Coordinate with housing and land use programs to ensure that septic and well constraints do not unnecessarily block rural ADUs, small-scale infill, or rehabilitation of underutilized buildings, while still protecting groundwater and surface water resources.
   b. Incorporate drought resilience, PFAS and emerging contaminant risks, and extreme weather vulnerabilities into rural infrastructure funding criteria so that replacement projects also address long-term climate and public health risks.

2. **Conduct a statewide water availability study to: examine current water resources and capacity; calculate future needs and availability; assess new and different water technologies such as desalinization; examine the current threats of climate change, drought and PFAS contamination; address the needs of both water stewards and water users; and recommend a new funding formula for local and state water systems that is not based on water usage**.
   a. Secure legislative support and funding for this critical, large-scale project.
   b. During this process and before wide-scale expansion of MWRA infrastructure to serve new areas of eastern Massachusetts, cautiously and prudently assess the long-term health, viability and capacity of the Quabbin Reservoir to ensure it is protected and better serves all areas of Massachusetts.
      i. Assess and meaningfully study water-related needs and issues of western Massachusetts and especially communities adjacent to and near the Quabbin and Wachusett Reservoirs, including lack of or limited public water infrastructure and PFAS contamination, to determine if and how Quabbin resources can help.
      ii. Expand the MWRA Board to include more representation from Quabbin communities and western Massachusetts.

3. **Create and sustain a dedicated rural water, wastewater and stormwater infrastructure program**.
   a. Establish a state-funded, rural-focused water, wastewater and stormwater infrastructure program that supports planning, design, construction, and maintenance for small systems and unserved communities, building on the 2019 recommendation for a dedicated funding stream.
   b. Ensure eligibility for feasibility studies, asset management planning, and engineering for small projects that are too small to be competitive in existing state and federal programs but critical for local village centers and business districts.
   c. Prioritize projects that provide regional benefits, serve multiple districts or communities, or address clusters of small non-community public water systems where system failure would have outsized economic impacts.

4. **Advance rural-appropriate reforms to Title 5 and onsite wastewater rules.**

a. Work collaboratively with DEP, local boards of health, and rural stakeholders to pilot modest Title 5 changes to better enable development of ADUs, cluster development and other types of clustered housing in rural areas, such as approaches that reflect actual household size, soil conditions, and deed-restricted maximum occupancy while maintaining health and environmental standards.

5. Support small public water systems and village centers.

a. Develop clear, written step-by-step guidance and templates to foster economic development by helping small businesses and communities transition from private wells to public water supplies, with predictable timelines and expectations. Provide technical assistance to small businesses with water testing requirements.

b. Evaluate where and under what conditions smaller wellhead protection radii or alternative treatment technologies could be allowed in village centers to enable modest business and housing growth while managing risk.

c. Expand financial and technical assistance for small public water systems, including support for PFAS monitoring and treatment, asset management, leak detection, and Global Positioning System (GPS) mapping of infrastructure.

d. Direct DEP or Mass Water to provide evidence-based/data-driven assistance for development of long-term maintenance and upgrade plans and a corresponding revenue forecast and formula to help local rural water and wastewater commissioners set reasonable, appropriate local rates.

6. Expand support for innovative and small-scale treatment technologies.

a. Increase state support for the Massachusetts Alternative Septic System Test Center (MASSTC) so it can address a wider range of soils and conditions statewide and accelerate testing of small-scale, rural-appropriate technologies.

b. Encourage and streamline permitting for small, shared treatment systems, cluster systems, and modular plants that can serve village centers and small developments where full-scale plants are not financially or operationally feasible. Create loans, grants and incentives to promote shared systems.

c. Provide capital planning and pre-development funding for small public water supplies.



A small-scale water treatment system in Ashfield.



Leicester Dam Lake.

d. Recognize source-separation sanitation (composting, urine-diverting, incinerating, evaporative, and vacuum-flush systems) as a parallel infrastructure pathway for rural communities that could be evaluated alongside septic, I/A systems, cluster systems, and sewer.

7. Build rural technical assistance and operator capacity.

a. Increase DEP and partner-agency technical assistance staffing dedicated to rural areas without public sewer and water, with a focus on helping small systems plan, design, and fund infrastructure replacements and compliance upgrades.

b. Support expanded training and workforce development pathways for certified water and wastewater operators that are tailored to different learning styles and accessible through community colleges, vocational schools, UMass and other higher education partners, with stable funding so successful programs are not lost when short-term grants end. Engage the Commonwealth's designated rural-policy coordination lead as a partner in identifying rural training needs and ensuring that programs are accessible to very small and low-capacity systems.

c. DEP should continue to allow individual operators to serve multiple small systems and should review rules such as the 100-mile radius and response-time requirements to determine where they can be expanded or made more flexible for large rural regions while still protecting public health.

8. Strengthen governance and regional collaboration.

a. Pursue targeted legislative changes to modernize governance of rural water and sewer districts, including clearer borrowing authority, flexibility to appoint commissioners from outside district boundaries where appropriate, and improved tools to collect user fees and manage delinquencies.

b. Encourage exploration of alternative organizational models—including integration of districts into municipal government where locally desired—to improve wages, benefits, and administrative support for small systems.

c. Promote regional planning and interconnection projects that enhance drought resilience, emergency backup supplies, and operational efficiency, with grant criteria that explicitly reward multi-system and multi-town collaborations.

ACTION PLAN



This section of the Plan describes how different stakeholders, based on role, can use the Plan to find their place for advocacy and action. It also identifies the top recommendations for implementation based on recommendations that will have the greatest cascading impact.

HOW TO USE THIS PLAN

The 2026 Rural Policy Plan is written to be used by people in various roles. Because recommendations are organized by topic but sorted into four action types (funding, legislative, policy, and programming—see Appendix B) and because each chapter names the state agencies, regional bodies, and local roles best positioned to act, different readers will get the most value by entering the Plan at different points. The guidance below is organized by role.

The RPAC

For the RPAC, this Plan functions as a shared work plan and accountability document. Use it to track which recommendations have moved, flag where a recommendation in one chapter is stalled because a related recommendation in another chapter has not advanced, and convene the state agencies, legislators, and regional bodies named throughout the Plan around a common agenda rather than nine disconnected ones.

State agencies and the Governor's administration

Use the "universal but amplified" framework from the introduction as a working test: does an existing statewide formula, grant design, or deadline assume a scale, market, or staffing level that rural communities do not have? Recommendations labeled **Policy** are almost always within a secretariat's or agency's existing administrative authority, and are potentially the fastest wins available.

- Before releasing a new grant program, check whether the program addresses (or limits) rural eligibility, requires a reasonable match, or has unnecessary reporting barriers. Adjust design before publication rather than after rural applicants are shut out.
- Because many recommendations sit at the

Photos: (above) Senate President Karen Spilka addresses a crowd in Hatfield; (right) two Wellfleet fishermen.

intersection of two secretariats' jurisdiction (for example, housing and environmental permitting, or economic development and workforce training), use the "Approaching this Plan holistically" section to identify where cross-secretariat coordination, not just single-agency action, is required.

- The Governor's office can use this Plan directly when shaping the annual budget proposal (H.1), issuing executive orders (as with the Director of Rural Policy position in the EOED and Rural Development Fund in the 2019 Plan cycle), and setting expectations for secretariats to review programs via a rural lens.

State legislators and legislative staff

Use the "Four types of recommendations" framework to find recommendations labeled **Legislative** to identify where a statutory change is the necessary lever. Recommendations labeled **Funding** are budget season tools — use them to draft earmarks, outside sections, or line-item requests with rural-specific justification already written.

- During the annual budget process, scan chapters for "Funding" items tied to specific dollar figures (Rural School Aid, SAPHE 2.0, Chapter 90) to anchor appropriations requests.
- Because the Plan will have a longer lifespan than a single legislative session, the Plan does not reference many specific bills. The Plan's content and recommendations, however, frame the rural stakes and when legislation may be required.



Regional organizations: RPAs, Councils of Governments, RTAs, Counties and regional districts

Many recommendations name regional entities directly as the implementers best positioned to act. Use this Plan as a shared reference point when writing regional plans, technical assistance scopes, and grant applications, so that member municipalities see a consistent rationale across the region rather than town-by-town improvisation.

- Cross-reference recommendations that call for "regional housing plans," "regional economic development technical assistance," or "regional IT services" to build a multi-year work plan and budget request rather than reacting grant cycle by grant cycle.
- For affiliation groups like the Massachusetts Association of Regional Planning Agencies (MARPA) use the Plan for advocacy: identify when and where non-competitive, capacity-adjusted funding would better serve regional and statewide needs.

Local officials: Select Boards, town administrators, and municipal staff

Start with the Municipal Sustainability chapter, since it speaks directly to the staffing, revenue, and shared-service constraints that shape what any other chapter's recommendations will require locally. From there, use the "Challenge in Rural Communities" section of each relevant chapter to build the case for a warrant article, capital request, or grant application, and use the rural typology that best describes your town to judge which recommendations are most likely to apply.

- Use **Programming** recommendations to identify what you can pursue now with a Regional Planning Agency, Council of Governments, county government, or neighboring towns where little to no state action is required.
- Use **Policy** and **Funding** recommendations as talking points when a state agency's grant terms, deadlines, or match requirements do not fit your town's capacity.
- Bring the relevant chapter to Town Meeting or Select Board discussions so residents see that a local decision (a housing article, a water district vote) connects to a documented statewide rural pattern, not just a local dispute.

Residents and community members

Find the one or two chapters that match what you are already trying to understand — a housing proposal,

a school budget vote, a water rate increase — and read the "Challenge in Rural Communities" narrative first for context, then the recommendations. The "Approaching this Plan holistically" section is a good primer if you want to understand why a local decision in one area is shaping options in another.

- Use the Plan to bring specifics, not just concerns, to public comment: citing a recommendation number shows local officials and legislators that a request is grounded in the statewide, vetted Plan.

STRATEGIC SEQUENCING

Since the inception of the RPAC, the Commission has pursued two implementation strategies: pursuing and advocating for the most important goals, and monitoring policy and legislative action to advocate for rural interests during development of policy and/or passage of legislation. This two-prong strategy will continue.

To identify top priorities in this Plan, the Commission conducted an analysis of which recommendations, if advanced first, make other recommendations easier, cheaper, or more durable to achieve (and where sequencing missteps could work against the Plan's own goals). Several chapters already point to critical connections; Municipal Sustainability acknowledges the need to codify Chapter 90 formula changes and the work of the PILOT Commission, which are addressed in Transportation and Land Use and the need for water and wastewater regulation changes are highlighted in the Housing chapter as a constraint to rural housing development. Applying that same logic systematically across all nine chapters surfaces connections, and helps us answer in what order the Commonwealth and its rural partners should tackle this list to get the most value from limited time, staff, and political capital.

Six leverage points that unlock the rest of the Plan

These are not necessarily the highest-dollar recommendations in the Plan. They are the ones that function as infrastructure for other recommendations — acting on them first reduces the cost, risk, or difficulty of everything downstream.

1. **Establish a Governor-authorized rural-policy coordination function.** Rural challenges do not align neatly with agency jurisdictions. The Commonwealth should permanently establish and resource a rural-policy coordination function with the authority to convene secretariats, review policies and programs through a rural lens, align cross-agency implementation, and elevate unresolved barriers. The Administration should determine the organizational structure best suited to carry out this function, which may include strengthening an existing role, establishing a dedicated office or unit, or creating another formal cross-secretariat mechanism. The function should work in partnership with the Rural Policy Advisory Commission and rural stakeholders. Without this capacity, rural interests will continue to be addressed inconsistently, often after statewide policies have already been designed around assumptions that do not fit rural communities.
2. **Fix the municipal revenue formulas.** Nearly every chapter's narrative traces back to the same root cause: rural towns run out of budget and staff before they run out of need. Four recommendations attack that root cause directly: Rural School Aid and Chapter 70 reform, permanent Chapter 90 codification, PILOT/state-owned land reform, and increased Unrestricted General Government Aid. None of these recommendations is about a specific service; each is about increasing general operating room in the rural municipal budget.
3. **Fund the regional entities and people who do the work.** Money alone does not build capacity. Non-competitive, sustained funding for Regional Planning Agencies and Councils of Governments, a reinstated Efficiency and Regionalization grant program, and a stronger municipal workforce training pipeline together create the staff capacity that dozens of "Programming" recommendations need. Funding formulas and capacity-building have to move together—new money without new hands to deploy it just sits unspent; new regional mandates without money to staff them just add unfunded work to towns that are already stretched thin.
4. **Correct the state data and mapping tools used to make eligibility and siting decisions.** MassEnviroScreen and the Mass Clean Energy Infrastructure Site Suitability Mapping Tool are flagged in both the Land Use and Municipal Sustainability chapters as carrying an urban bias that skews outcomes. These same tools are already used to evaluate Municipal Vulnerability Program applications and Massachusetts Integrated Land Use Strategy (MILUS) decisions. Because these tools sit upstream of many funding and siting decisions, correcting them once has a multiplier effect: it improves rural odds in every downstream grant competition and siting review

that relies on them, without requiring a separate fix in each program.

5. **Get rural priorities into MILUS and enact permitting reform early, before siting decisions lock in.** Embedding rural priorities in the Massachusetts Integrated Land Use Strategy, advancing Title 5 and onsite wastewater reforms for rural conditions, and streamlining culvert and small-bridge permitting together determine how easily rural land can actually be built on, protected, or made climate-resilient. Because MILUS will shape where the Commonwealth expects its 220,000 new housing units and clean energy siting to go, getting rural representation right in MILUS first makes every subsequent Housing, Land Use, and Technology (data center) recommendation easier to implement with rural interests protected rather than retrofitted after decisions are made.
6. **Finish broadband access and treat municipal IT/ cybersecurity as core infrastructure.** Completing universal broadband and treating cybersecurity and municipal IT as critical infrastructure is a prerequisite, not a parallel track, for several recommendations elsewhere. Where broadband gaps or unstaffed IT remain, programs elsewhere in the Plan that assume connectivity will underperform no matter how well they are funded.

Where sequencing matters most

Some recommendations are safe to pursue in any order. Others impact how other recommendations play out and should be resolved first.

PILOT reform before new conservation asks. Without meaningful change to state-owned land reimbursement, rural communities will have limited willingness to support additional land protection. Pursuing MILUS conservation or clean energy siting goals before PILOT reform risks local political resistance.

Rural School Aid now, Chapter 70 overhaul on its own timeline. Chapter 70 formula reform will be slow, laborious, and possibly contentious. Rural School Aid increases are the faster, less contested lever; the Foundation Formula Review Commission process is the slower, structural one. Treating them as sequential rather than the same ask keeps near-term relief flowing while the harder decisions are made.

Municipal capacity and negotiating support should precede siting pressure, not follow it. Data center and battery storage proposals are already reaching rural towns. The proposed Office of Rural Negotiation and updated zoning technical assistance deliver the most value if in place before, not after, a town is already negotiating alone with a developer.

Regionalization is not a substitute for direct funding. Throughout the Plan, there is acknowledgment that regionalization of services can improve service delivery and capacity in rural areas. However, regionalizing municipal services does not necessarily reduce expenses for rural municipalities because often services were under-funded before regionalization. Regionalization as a cost-cutting measure, without the reform to funding formulas in parallel, risks discrediting regionalization as a strategy when costs rise instead of fall.

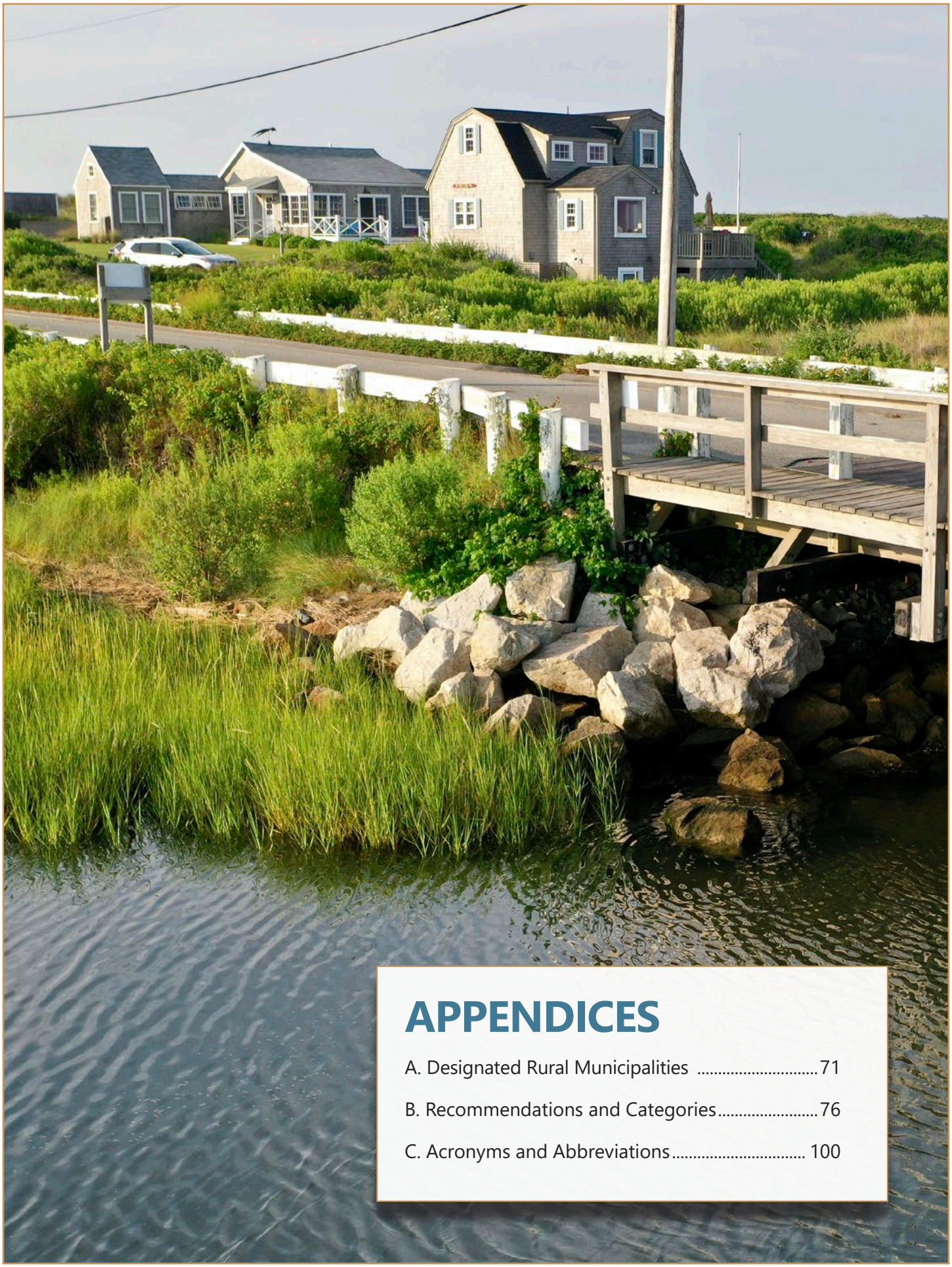
CATEGORIZED RECOMMENDATIONS

This redrafting focused on identifying and constraining recommendations to actions that can be accomplished at the local, regional or state level. It does not try to influence or rely on federal policy and legislation. Further, the recommendations were developed to fit into one of four categories: Funding, Legislative, Policy and/or Programming. Effort was also made to ensure that there is a balance between these four categories so that positive change can occur in a variety of ways.



A family takes in the view at Pleasant Valley Wildlife Sanctuary in Lenox.

The tables in Appendix B list the recommendations from each chapter and identify the category of each recommendation. Some recommendations fall into more than one category. As described above, identifying the category of each recommendation helps identify who is the best implementer be it a local official, regional organization, state agency or legislator.



APPENDICES

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APPENDIX A: DESIGNATED RURAL MUNICIPALITIES

The legislation that created the RPAC defines rural as **municipalities with a population density of less than 500 people per square mile and/or municipalities with a population of less than 7,000 people**. Using the 2020 U.S. Census, there are 181 rural municipalities in Massachusetts encompassing 60% of the state's total land area and 13% of its total population.

Municipality	County	Regional Planning Agency	2020 Census Population	2020 Population Mi²
Adams	Berkshire	BRPC	8,166	356.0
Alford	Berkshire	BRPC	486	42.0
Aquinnah	Dukes	MVC	439	81.8
Ashburnham	Worcester	MRPC	6,315	163.3
Ashby	Middlesex	MRPC	3,193	134.2
Ashfield	Franklin	FRCOG	1,695	42.1
Athol	Worcester	MRPC	11,945	366.7
Avon	Norfolk	OCPC	4,777	1,091.0
Barre	Worcester	CMRPC	5,530	124.7
Becket	Berkshire	BRPC	1,931	41.7
Belchertown	Hampshire	PVPC	15,350	291.1
Berkley	Bristol	SRPEDD	6,764	409.0
Berlin	Worcester	CMRPC	3,158	244.3
Bernardston	Franklin	FRCOG	2,102	89.8
Blandford	Hampden	PVPC	1,215	23.5
Bolton	Worcester	MAPC	5,665	284.2
Bourne	Barnstable	CCC	20,452	499.9
Boxborough	Middlesex	MAPC	5,506	531.2
Boxford	Essex	MVPC	8,203	342.2
Boylston	Worcester	CMRPC	4,849	302.5
Brewster	Barnstable	CCC	10,318	448.9
Brimfield	Hampden	PVPC	3,694	106.4
Brookfield	Worcester	CMRPC	3,439	221.5
Buckland	Franklin	FRCOG	1,816	92.8
Carlisle	Middlesex	MAPC	5,237	340.9
Carver	Plymouth	SRPEDD	11,645	310.1
Charlemont	Franklin	FRCOG	1,185	45.4
Charlton	Worcester	CMRPC	13,315	313.1
Chatham	Barnstable	CCC	6,594	406.5
Cheshire	Berkshire	BRPC	3,258	120.9
Chester	Hampden	PVPC	1,228	33.4
Chesterfield	Hampshire	PVPC	1,186	38.1
Chilmark	Dukes	MVC	1,212	63.3
Clarksburg	Berkshire	BRPC	1,657	129.9

Municipality	County	Regional Planning Agency	2020 Census Population	2020 Population Mi²
Colrain	Franklin	FRCOG	1,606	37.0
Conway	Franklin	FRCOG	1,761	46.7
Cummington	Hampshire	PVPC	829	36.0
Dalton	Berkshire	BRPC	6,330	290.2
Deerfield	Franklin	FRCOG	5,090	157.6
Dighton	Bristol	SRPEDD	8,101	361.9
Douglas	Worcester	CMRPC	8,983	247.0
Dover	Norfolk	MAPC	5,923	386.4
Dunstable	Middlesex	NMCOG	3,358	202.9
East Brookfield	Worcester	CMRPC	2,224	225.9
Eastham	Barnstable	CCC	5,752	411.1
Edgartown	Dukes	MVC	5,168	191.5
Egremont	Berkshire	BRPC	1,372	72.8
Erving	Franklin	FRCOG	1,665	120.0
Essex	Essex	MAPC	3,675	259.5
Florida	Berkshire	BRPC	694	28.5
Freetown	Bristol	SRPEDD	9,206	251.5
Gill	Franklin	FRCOG	1,551	110.9
Goshen	Hampshire	PVPC	960	55.3
Gosnold	Dukes	MVC	70	5.2
Granby	Hampshire	PVPC	6,110	219.3
Granville	Hampden	PVPC	1,538	36.4
Great Barrington	Berkshire	BRPC	7,172	158.7
Groton	Middlesex	MRPC	11,315	345.3
Groveland	Essex	MVPC	6,752	755.0
Hadley	Hampshire	PVPC	5,325	228.5
Halifax	Plymouth	OCPC	7,749	479.9
Hampden	Hampden	PVPC	4,966	252.9
Hancock	Berkshire	BRPC	757	21.2
Hardwick	Worcester	CMRPC	2,667	69.1
Harvard	Worcester	MRPC	6,851	259.9
Hatfield	Hampshire	PVPC	3,352	209.3
Hawley	Franklin	FRCOG	353	11.4
Heath	Franklin	FRCOG	723	29.0
Hinsdale	Berkshire	BRPC	1,919	92.1
Holland	Hampden	PVPC	2,603	210.0
Hopedale	Worcester	CMRPC	6,017	1,167.1
Hubbardston	Worcester	MRPC	4,328	105.5
Huntington	Hampshire	PVPC	2,094	78.6
Ipswich	Essex	MAPC	13,785	423.1
Lakeville	Plymouth	SRPEDD	11,523	385.4
Lancaster	Worcester	MRPC	8,441	305.0

Municipality	County	Regional Planning Agency	2020 Census Population	2020 Population Mi²
Lanesborough	Berkshire	BRPC	3,038	104.6
Lee	Berkshire	BRPC	5,788	219.3
Leicester	Worcester	CMRPC	11,087	474.6
Lenox	Berkshire	BRPC	5,095	240.1
Leverett	Franklin	FRCOG	1,865	81.6
Leyden	Franklin	FRCOG	734	40.8
Lincoln	Middlesex	MAPC	7,014	488.2
Lunenburg	Worcester	MRPC	11,782	445.9
Manchester-by-the-Sea	Essex	MAPC	5,395	580.7
Marion	Plymouth	SRPEDD	5,347	365.5
Mattapoisett	Plymouth	SRPEDD	6,508	394.9
Mendon	Worcester	CMRPC	6,228	344.1
Merrimac	Essex	MVPC	6,723	788.2
Middleborough	Plymouth	SRPEDD	24,245	348.6
Middlefield	Hampshire	PVPC	385	15.9
Millville	Worcester	CMRPC	3,174	643.3
Monroe	Franklin	FRCOG	118	11.0
Monson	Hampden	PVPC	8,150	184.0
Montague	Franklin	FRCOG	8,580	282.2
Monterey	Berkshire	BRPC	1,095	41.3
Montgomery	Hampden	PVPC	819	54.4
Mount Washington	Berkshire	BRPC	160	7.2
Nahant	Essex	MAPC	3,334	2,679.2
Nantucket	Nantucket	NPEDC	14,255	298.2
New Ashford	Berkshire	BRPC	250	18.5
New Braintree	Worcester	CMRPC	996	48.1
New Marlborough	Berkshire	BRPC	1,528	32.4
New Salem	Franklin	FRCOG	983	21.9
Newbury	Essex	MVPC	6,716	277.0
North Brookfield	Worcester	CMRPC	4,735	224.8
Northfield	Franklin	FRCOG	2,866	83.3
Oak Bluffs	Dukes	MVC	5,341	725.2
Oakham	Worcester	CMRPC	1,851	87.6
Orange	Franklin	FRCOG	7,569	214.0
Orleans	Barnstable	CCC	6,307	444.9
Otis	Berkshire	BRPC	1,634	45.6
Oxford	Worcester	CMRPC	13,347	501.3
Palmer	Hampden	PVPC	12,448	394.8
Paxton	Worcester	CMRPC	5,004	339.6
Pelham	Hampshire	PVPC	1,280	51.1
Pepperell	Middlesex	NMCOG	11,604	514.3
Peru	Berkshire	BRPC	814	31.4

Municipality	County	Regional Planning Agency	2020 Census Population	2020 Population Mi²
Petersham	Worcester	MRPC	1,194	22.0
Phillipston	Worcester	MRPC	1,726	71.1
Plainfield	Hampshire	PVPC	633	30.1
Plympton	Plymouth	OCPC	2,930	198.1
Princeton	Worcester	CMRPC	3,495	98.6
Provincetown	Barnstable	CCC	3,664	379.3
Rehoboth	Bristol	SRPEDD	12,502	268.9
Richmond	Berkshire	BRPC	1,407	74.2
Rochester	Plymouth	SRPEDD	5,717	168.5
Rockport	Essex	MAPC	6,992	989.3
Rowe	Franklin	FRCOG	424	18.0
Rowley	Essex	MVPC	6,161	329.1
Royalston	Worcester	MRPC	1,250	29.8
Russell	Hampden	PVPC	1,643	93.6
Rutland	Worcester	CMRPC	9,049	256.7
Sandisfield	Berkshire	BRPC	989	18.9
Sandwich	Barnstable	CCC	20,259	470.7
Savoy	Berkshire	BRPC	645	18.0
Sheffield	Berkshire	BRPC	3,327	69.1
Shelburne	Franklin	FRCOG	1,884	81.0
Sherborn	Middlesex	MAPC	4,401	275.7
Shirley	Middlesex	MRPC	7,431	469.6
Shutesbury	Franklin	FRCOG	1,717	64.5
Southampton	Hampshire	PVPC	6,224	221.1
Southwick	Hampden	PVPC	9,232	298.2
Spencer	Worcester	CMRPC	11,992	365.1
Sterling	Worcester	MRPC	7,985	261.6
Stockbridge	Berkshire	BRPC	2,018	88.0
Stow	Middlesex	MAPC	7,174	407.1
Sturbridge	Worcester	CMRPC	9,867	263.7
Sunderland	Franklin	FRCOG	3,663	254.6
Sutton	Worcester	CMRPC	9,357	289.0
Templeton	Worcester	MRPC	8,149	254.4
Tisbury	Dukes	MVC	4,815	734.0
Tolland	Hampden	PVPC	471	14.9
Topsfield	Essex	MAPC	6,569	515.7
Townsend	Middlesex	MRPC	9,127	277.7
Truro	Barnstable	CCC	2,454	116.6
Tyringham	Berkshire	BRPC	427	22.8
Upton	Worcester	CMRPC	8,000	371.8
Uxbridge	Worcester	CMRPC	14,162	479.4
Wales	Hampden	PVPC	1,832	116.3

Municipality	County	Regional Planning Agency	2020 Census Population	2020 Population Mi²
Ware	Hampshire	PVPC	10,066	292.5
Warren	Worcester	CMRPC	4,975	180.7
Warwick	Franklin	FRCOG	780	20.9
Washington	Berkshire	BRPC	494	13.1
Wellfleet	Barnstable	CCC	3,566	179.8
Wendell	Franklin	FRCOG	924	28.9
Wenham	Essex	MAPC	4,979	645.1
West Boylston	Worcester	CMRPC	7,877	610.7
West Bridgewater	Plymouth	OCPC	7,707	489.6
West Brookfield	Worcester	CMRPC	3,833	187.2
West Newbury	Essex	MVPC	4,500	332.9
West Stockbridge	Berkshire	BRPC	1,343	72.7
West Tisbury	Dukes	MVC	3,555	142.1
Westhampton	Hampshire	PVPC	1,622	59.8
Westminster	Worcester	MRPC	8,213	231.3
Westport	Bristol	SRPEDD	16,339	326.5
Whately	Franklin	FRCOG	1,607	79.6
Williamsburg	Hampshire	PVPC	2,504	97.7
Williamstown	Berkshire	BRPC	7,513	160.2
Winchendon	Worcester	MRPC	10,364	239.4
Windsor	Berkshire	BRPC	831	23.8
Worthington	Hampshire	PVPC	1,193	37.2

APPENDIX B: RECOMMENDATION CATEGORIES BY CHAPTER

The following tables cite the category associated with each recommendation.

Economic and Workforce Development	
Category	**Recommendation**
Programming	**1. Strengthen rural village centers and economic development capacity.**
Funding	a. Prioritize programs such as the Massachusetts Downtown Initiative Capital Program, Downtown Vitality, One Stop for Growth, re-established and better funded Community Compact Best Practices and Efficiency & Regionalization programs, and MassDevelopment tools to support sustained, place-based investments in rural village centers and clusters of towns. This includes funding regional coordinators—housed within regional organizations—to help municipalities develop and implement shared economic visions, build partnerships, and coordinate initiatives over multiple years.
Programming	**2. Assist rural small and micro businesses and producers.**
Programming; Funding	a. Sustain and broaden small business technical assistance and capital access in rural areas; ensure that rural Community Development Corporations and other qualified organizations, through funding for the Massachusetts Growth Capital Corporation, can deliver services.
Funding	b. Deploy flexible, low-barrier capital and loan products that work for very small deals, can be combined with grants, and can use federal-state matching opportunities for revolving loan funds serving rural small businesses.
Policy	c. Streamline and clarify health and safety code requirements for rural small-business start-ups.
Programming	d. Support collective marketing and retail initiatives—including Massachusetts-made product campaigns, rural general stores expanding into food service and value-added products, and similar efforts that strengthen rural village-center business districts.
Funding	e. Expand food, farm and forestry business diversification and viability loans and grants to ensure that these businesses that are central to rural quality of life sustain and grow. (Also see Land Use recommendations.)
Programming	f. Develop rural supply chain clusters to support rural ecosystems.
Policy	**3. Ensure One Stop for Growth grant programs, including MassDevelopment's, and other state economic tools, allow rural projects with modest budgets and incremental impacts to be competitive, not overshadowed by large, urban projects.**
Funding	a. Strengthen rural project financing, predevelopment and site readiness support.
Funding; Programming	b. Provide competitive grants and technical assistance for regional organizations and coordinated groups of rural towns to conduct predevelopment planning, feasibility analysis, and investment-readiness work for community-driven projects such as mixed-use village center redevelopment, industrial areas for small-scale manufacturing, and working-lands facilities, and help them stack federal, state, and private tools, including Opportunity Zone investments where applicable.
Funding	c. Reduce grant thresholds and job creation requirements for rural projects to support more small but critical rural ventures.

Economic and Workforce Development (cont.)	
Category	**Recommendation**
Funding	**4. Realign MOTT Regional Tourism Council (RTC) contracts so that award amounts are communicated by September 1st, funds are allocated by October 1st; and reduce 1:1 match requirements for rural RTCs.**
	Currently, RTCs receive annual MOTT funding halfway through the state fiscal year, with the requirement that funds must be allocated by June 30, which is particularly onerous for rural, small-staffed RTCs. The 1:1 match revenue and spend requirements limit the grant amount that any rural RTC representing lower-income, small-business-based communities can responsibly accept, thereby limiting growth and opportunity for rural RTCs.
Programming	**5. Develop regional rural economic development technical assistance programs housed in rural Regional Planning Agencies and/or Community Development Corporations to address unique rural municipal challenges and capacity constraints. Services to include are:**
Programming	a. Shared, multi-municipal economic development planning and community development.
Programming	b. Municipal education and civic engagement promoting economic development projects before projects that are misunderstood are scuttled by a community.
Programming	c. Development, expansion and promotion of rural youth job opportunities.
Programming	d. Business succession planning.
Programming	e. Promotion of elders as entrepreneurs, mentors and docents.
Funding	**6. Stabilize rural workforce infrastructure and ensure equitable access to workforce programs.**
Funding	a. Provide sustained funding to stabilize essential services at MassHire Career Centers in rural regions, recognizing that federal workforce allocation formulas do not adequately account for the higher costs of delivering services across large, geographically dispersed service areas. Supplemental rural funding should support core staffing, employer engagement, outreach, satellite and mobile service delivery, and other infrastructure necessary to ensure equitable access regardless of fluctuations in annual federal allocations or unemployment levels.
Funding; Policy	b. Incorporate rurality and service-delivery factors into state workforce funding and program design (e.g. distance and travel time to comprehensive Career Centers, transportation availability, and the cost of maintaining equitable access across large regions).
Funding	c. Design rural workforce funding to minimize reliance on competitive grant processes that can disadvantage regions with limited administrative and grant-writing capacity. Where possible, use objective rural eligibility criteria, formula-based or designated funding, multi-year awards, reduced match requirements, and flexible allowable uses that enable rural regions to build sustained capacity rather than repeatedly compete for short-term projects.

Economic and Workforce Development (cont.)	
Category	**Recommendation**
Programming	**7. Build rural talent pipelines through education–workforce partnerships.**
Programming	a. Enhance sustained investment in program development and staffing for partnerships that connect regional workforce boards, MassHire Career Centers, community colleges and state universities, vocational and technical high schools, adult education providers, employers, and community-based organizations. Investments should support sector partnerships and career pathways in priority rural industries such as health care, skilled trades, advanced manufacturing, agriculture, education, and municipal services, including strategies that embed workforce and career counseling staff in schools, libraries, community organizations, and other locations where rural residents already learn, work, and gather.
Programming; Funding	b. Expand rural access to work-based learning, including registered apprenticeship, pre-apprenticeship, paid internships, on-the-job training, and other earn-and-learn models, by providing technical assistance and financial support to smaller employers that may lack the human resources or administrative capacity to establish and sustain these programs independently.
Funding	c. Support regional approaches to workforce development that allow rural communities to aggregate demand across multiple employers and municipalities. Funding models should recognize that individual rural employers may not have enough hiring volume to support standalone training cohorts, even when a significant regional workforce need exists.
Programming	**8. Reduce barriers to employment and workforce participation and attract a diverse rural workforce.**
Funding; Programming	a. Advance universal pre-K and childcare goals with explicit strategies for rural childcare deserts, including capital and operating support, workforce development for early educators, and alignment with broader rural workforce and economic strategies.
Programming	b. Integrate transportation, broadband, housing, and workforce investments so that economic development initiatives account for whether rural residents can realistically access new jobs and training opportunities. Support flexible transportation solutions, remote and hybrid training infrastructure, and housing development near employment and education centers, in recognition that workforce shortages cannot be addressed independently from these underlying barriers.
Programming	c. Support local and regional efforts that promote welcoming, inclusive rural communities and connect new residents—including younger workers, families, and immigrants from diverse backgrounds—to employment, entrepreneurship resources, and civic engagement opportunities.
Funding	d. Provide flexible funding for supportive services that address the practical barriers preventing rural residents from entering or remaining in employment and training, including transportation, childcare, work-related equipment and clothing, credentialing costs, technology, and other locally identified needs. Allow regional workforce organizations sufficient flexibility to respond to barriers that may differ substantially from those experienced in more densely populated areas.
	Currently, RTCs receive annual MOTT funding halfway through the state fiscal year, with the requirement that funds must be allocated by June 30, which is particularly onerous for rural, small-staffed RTCs. The 1:1 match revenue and spend requirements limit the grant amount that any rural RTC representing lower-income, small-business-based communities can responsibly accept, thereby limiting growth and opportunity for rural RTCs.

Education	
Category	**Recommendation**
Funding	1. **Until a full overhaul of Chapter 70 and the Foundation Budget formula, increase Rural School Aid to $68.5 million with annual increases tied to inflation.** The Commonwealth should include the full $68.5 million in Rural School Aid funding recommended by the 2022 Rural Schools Commission in the FY28 budget and restore recent cuts through supplemental appropriations where possible. Unless or until the state's education formula is revised to recognize the inequities and unique challenges facing rural school districts, Rural School Aid funding will still be necessary and, thus, could be strengthened by:
Legislative	a. Clarifying and codifying the purpose and targeting of Rural School Aid. Maintain Rural School Aid as additional education aid for towns and regional districts that qualify based on income level and student-population sparsity, with tiered priorities so that the sparsest districts receive the largest portion of aid.
Funding	b. Allowing fiscal-year holdovers. Allow districts to carry Rural School Aid funds across fiscal years so that they can better plan for sustainable budgets, rather than receiving aid in the fall and having to spend it down by the end of the fiscal year.
Funding	c. Using multi-year averages for eligibility. Calculate Rural School Aid eligibility using a three-year average, ensuring that a single unanticipated one-year difference does not have an undue impact on aid levels.
Funding	d. Phasing down aid gradually when eligibility is lost. Allow for a graduated decline in aid when a district is no longer eligible based on income or enrollment, so districts are not forced to absorb abrupt funding cliffs.
Funding	2. **Through the pending Foundation Formula Review Commission, reform the Chapter 70 foundation formula and the local contribution formula to recognize increased per pupil costs in rural districts and the unique rural financial impacts of factors in the formulas.** On the expense side, per pupil costs are between 16 and 23 percent higher in rural districts because of unavoidable fixed and legacy costs, which should be factored into the state's contribution percentage to rural districts. On the revenue side, the formula should be revised to recognize and reduce the impact of outliers in small rural communities.
Funding	a. Use median, or even the mode, income in the formula or create some other factor to eliminate the impact of a few wealthy residents in an otherwise low-income town.
Funding	b. Temper the use of EQV for land-rich, income-poor communities. Adjust how EQV is used to recognize that large rural landowners, such as farmers and foresters who are land-rich but not income-rich, should not push rural towns into higher required local contributions than residents can realistically afford.
Funding	c. Analyze and consider adding modifiers to the formula or providing full state funding for specific unique problems such as: i. Education costs for children in court-appointed foster care. ii. Geographic modifier/additive to account for transportation and other extraordinary costs for SPED out-of-district placements when services are not available in or near the district. iii. Reduction to assumed school enrollment of 350 students in rural districts. iv. Legacy cost additive for schools with significant enrollment decline. v. Increased behavioral health funding, including an assessment of percent of K-12 population requiring services and modifying the funding allocation to districts that have a disproportionate number of students requiring services.

Education (cont.)	
Category	**Recommendation**
Programming; Funding	**3. Expand access to high-quality early childhood education in rural communities.** The Commonwealth should develop and fund rural-appropriate preschool and early education models, including consideration of expanding eligibility for the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative beyond Gateway Cities, supporting school- and community-based delivery models, and accounting for the higher per-child costs associated with transportation, small enrollment, staffing recruitment, and dispersed geography in rural areas.
Legislative	**4. Adopt H.517/S.314 – A Sustainable Future for Rural Schools and aligned policy changes to stabilize rural district finances.** A Sustainable Future for Rural Schools includes reforms that are designed to stabilize rural district budgets, preserve core educational opportunities, and prevent the negative cycle that many rural communities now face. Recommended reforms include:
Funding	a. Robust Rural Aid and a declining enrollment fund.
Funding	b. Reimbursement for out-of-district transportation and foster care transportation.
Funding	c. Fully funded regional transportation.
Policy	d. Examination of DESE's binding regulations and administrative requirements as they affect rural schools.
Programming; Funding	e. Financial and practical support for regionalization where appropriate.
Policy	f. More equitable geographic representation on the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.
Programming; Funding	**5. Support comprehensive collaboration between rural schools through dedicated funding and facilitated shared services.** Regionalization will not fully resolve the financial crisis in rural Massachusetts and is very difficult. It could, however, improve the quality of education and expand educational offerings for some districts. *Update: In June 2026, the Legislature and Governor established a $16.5 million School District Regionalization and Shared Services Grant Program through the FY26 supplemental budget directly responsive to this recommendation. The Commonwealth should build on this initial investment with the sustained, multi-year funding described below, and rural districts should engage early with DESE's forthcoming public toolkit on regionalization and shared services.*
Programming	a. Create incentives and technical assistance for shared services including special education, advanced education classes, transportation, human resources, procurement, collective bargaining and shared administrative services and leadership.
Funding; Programming	b. Provide multi-year dedicated funding and technical assistance to help rural districts explore and implement shared services.
Programming	c. Build DESE's statewide technical assistance capacity for rural collaboration and regionalization so that DESE is a full, dedicated and expert partner that can support rural districts during shared services planning and full regionalization exploration.
Funding; Programming	d. Ensure the new School District Regionalization and Shared Services Grant Program (FY26 supplemental budget, $16.5M) is renewed and expanded in future budget cycles, that its DESE-administered public toolkit is developed with meaningful rural input, and that grant outreach reaches under-resourced districts that may lack capacity to competitively apply.

Education (cont.)	
Category	**Recommendation**
Policy	**6. Address the unique challenges and disparities experienced by rural school districts and municipalities through more extensive DESE policy, programmatic, and regulatory actions.** The Commonwealth/DESE could::
Programming	a. Conduct statewide school transportation vendor bidding to increase competition and reduce costs.
Programming	b. Offer professional assistance and mediation to local districts during union contract negotiations.
Funding	c. Increase rural circuit breaker reimbursement to cover the full cost of transportation and a higher percentage of out of district placement costs, and provide a predictable and consistent date for the reimbursement.
Legislative	d. Prohibit the creation of new or the expansion of existing Charter Schools in rural areas with declining enrollment.
Programming; Funding	e. Create and fund rural special education centers to improve education service delivery and reduce unpredictable costs.
Programming	f. Convene a study group or commission to examine the impact of School Choice in areas of severe declining enrollment.
Funding	g. a.Take on a larger percentage of education costs statewide and reduce reliance on the regressive local property tax.

Housing	
Category	**Recommendation**
Funding	**1. Create rural-appropriate capital tools, set asides and programs that acknowledge the challenges of building housing in rural towns and the increased costs of small-scale developments in areas without infrastructure.**
Funding	a. Revise existing state housing programs (e.g., Affordable Housing Trust Fund, Housing Stabilization, Housing Innovations, and any Rural Development Fund successor) to provide competitive access for rural, small-scale housing developments.
Funding	b. Provide substantially higher per-unit subsidies for rural housing projects to acknowledge the increased cost of small-scale but appropriately sized projects in areas without water, sewer or road access.
Funding	c. Support rural small-scale projects, including small rental developments, clustered homeownership, ADUs, adaptive reuse, village-scale infill, and small-scale multifamily in or near traditional village centers, with subsidy levels calibrated to low rural rents and sale prices for rural constrained markets or the increased cost of land and construction materials for seasonal communities.
Funding	d. Embed rural scoring criteria in the Qualified Allocation Plan so that rural communities and projects can realistically compete for tax credits.
Funding; Programming	e. Offer non-competitive funding with a simplified application process, predevelopment assistance and technical support to rural municipalities that have limited capacity and staffing; avoid tying core funding to planning and zoning reforms that are difficult to achieve, nor entirely applicable, without capacity.
Funding	f. Revise existing state funding streams to better align with the federally recognized Community Land Trust ground-lease model.
Policy	**2. Create a new place-based designation that complements existing designations, like Gateway Cities and Seasonal Communities, for rural municipalities with low population density, low equalized property value, limited water/sewer infrastructure, low housing production, high housing cost burden, and low rents relative to construction costs.**
Programming; Funding	a. Support targeted outreach, pipeline development, and predevelopment grants to encourage nonprofit and for profit developers, builders, and modular manufacturers to pursue rural projects, including marketing materials that showcase rural housing opportunities in constrained markets.
Funding	b. Expand access to homeownership subsidies through a rural analogue to Commonwealth Builder, expanded and more flexible Neighborhood Stabilization tools, and similar initiatives, so that moderate-income buyers and first-generation homeowners in non-sewered and weak-market towns can benefit from new construction, small-scale cluster developments, and rehabbed properties.
Funding	**3. Expand toolkit and funding mechanisms for Seasonal Communities that acknowledge the challenges of building and preserving year-round housing in rural areas where extremely high market prices are driven by the seasonal/vacation and luxury market.**
Programming; Funding	a. Support existing and new regional Community Land Trusts, which can develop, re-develop, hold, and monitor land and housing restricted to year-round occupancy in perpetuity at a variety of Area Median Incomes using the nationally recognized Ground Lease model, thus relieving the burden on rural municipal governments with limited capacity.
Programming	b. Develop state capacity to provide support for the development of housing and related programs for essential public-sector employees.

Housing (cont.)	
Category	**Recommendation**
Legislative	c. Advance legislative passage of a Local Option Transfer Fee to fund affordable and attainable year-round housing, including the acquisition of year-round deed restrictions and encourage more towns to take advantage of the Residential Exemption that reduces tax burden on year-round residents in communities with high second home markets.
Funding	**4. Make rehabilitation and preservation of existing housing financially and administratively feasible.** Increase and better target funding for rehabilitation of underutilized, vacant, distressed, or deteriorated rural housing, including both owner-occupied homes and small rental properties owned by local landlords.
Funding	a. Supplement CDBG with state dollars and support regional, multi-town rehabilitation programs administered by entities such as regional housing authorities.
Legislative	b. Clarify CPA language to allow funds to be used for rehabilitation of existing housing when a new affordable unit is created, e.g. conversion of a single-family home to a two-family home, creation of an accessory apartment, conversion of a seasonal home to a year-round home, etc.
Policy; Funding	c. Review and adjust applicable regulations, regulatory triggers, and septic standards that can make modest rehab prohibitively expensive in low-value markets, including: i. Reassess statutory, regulatory, and code-based thresholds, including fixed percentages of assessed value, that can unintentionally trigger full code upgrades on modest rehab projects in low-value rural markets. ii. Where authorized, revise wastewater regulations, technical standards, or guidance to tailor on-site wastewater design assumptions to regional soils and actual household sizes in rural areas. *See Water and Wastewater*. iii. Provide more staffing to the Office of the Attorney General's Neighborhood Renewal Division to usher more abandoned homes through the receivership process.
Funding	**5. Make adaptive re-use of existing structures financially and administratively feasible.**
Funding	a. Align state funding to better target adaptive re-use of underutilized or vacant structures, such as schoolhouses, parsonages, church buildings, barns, closed colleges, shopping malls and fire stations.
Programming	b. Support local and regional efforts to identify underutilized parcels and buildings, including those with absentee landowners, and provide legal and technical assistance to convert suitable sites to housing through adaptive reuse or small-scale infill.
Funding	c. Incentivize through funding or tax credits age-in-place modifications, home sharing and intergenerational housing.
Funding	**6. Fund rural housing development capacity.**
Funding	a. Provide sustained funding for regional housing coordinators, technical assistance, and peer networks in rural regions, building on models such as regional housing plans, regional housing services offices, small-town housing working groups, and shared housing staff that have already proven effective in western Massachusetts.
Funding	b. Provide assistance to RPAs to support the ongoing training and education for local boards, Town Meeting members, and municipal staff in rural communities so they can efficiently understand rural housing tools, communicate clearly about the need for housing of all types, affordability, and effectively support well-designed housing initiatives in public forums.

Housing (cont.)	
Category	**Recommendation**
Funding; Policy; Programming; Legislative	c. Support the creation and updating of rural regional housing plans (in place of individual municipal plans) and implementation strategies with dedicated grants; recognize such plans as best practices in statewide policy and funding decisions, while ensuring that lack of a plan, nor pace of resulting housing production, does not prevent low-capacity towns from accessing core programs; extend the life of municipal and regional housing plans from five years to ten years both in recognition that significant change to housing markets in many rural communities is slow and to acknowledge the limited existing capacity to generate these plans. i. Create a clearinghouse of best practices and approaches to public engagement and education, zoning, small-scale wastewater, etc. to help rural municipalities think about and promote housing development. ii. Provide technical assistance and seed funding for the creation and initial operation of regional housing trusts and other innovative collaborations. iii. Support legislation like S.1307, An Act Relative to Regional Municipal Affordable Housing Trust Funds that would allow rural municipalities to work together and share resources like CPA funds to develop housing. Related and in addition, allow a percentage of units developed in another town be counted towards a supporting community's Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI) when formal agreements, revenue sharing and/or a regional housing plan is in place.
Policy	**7. Analyze all housing development funding programs offered by the state to assess rural eligibility and if and how they restrict and/or encourage housing production in rural markets, including very small developments (<3 units)**
Policy	**8. Work with EOHLC to address data limitations to more accurately track rural housing production in the Commonwealth's regional housing needs assessments.** EOHLC is using the Census Address Count Listing Files to track housing production across the state. The dataset has known limitations, particularly for rural areas. For example, it considers all new residential addresses as housing units without regard to seasonal occupancy. Rural address list updates are also generally less reliable. This Census data lends itself to overestimates of the production of new housing available to residents. Better documenting and communicating these data limitations is key to informed policy-making that better reflects the goal to achieve a stable and growing population in rural Massachusetts. In particular, it is essential to ensure that data limitations and HLC's very low projections for rural housing production needs do not result in the Commonwealth underprioritizing new development in rural areas.

Land Use	
Category	**Recommendation**
Funding	**1. Modernize the state-owned land and watershed land reimbursement framework.**
Funding	a. Through the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) Commission, recommend revising the PILOT formula or creating a complementary reimbursement factor for state owned land that reflects not just property value, but ecosystem services, climate and land use goals, and recognizes the way large state holdings constrain local economic development.
Funding	b. Ensure that reforms protect rural municipalities from continued erosion of their share of finite PILOT resources as property values grow faster in metropolitan areas. Without meaningful changes to state owned land reimbursement, rural communities will have limited willingness to support additional land protection.
Funding	c. Include all protected land in the PILOT formula to ensure statewide equity.
Funding	d. Include the impacts of MILUS goals into the analysis and assessment of formula changes.
Funding	e. Consider creating a maximum and a minimum payment rather than holding all current payments harmless. Slow growing rural municipalities will never receive an equitable share of PILOT if a hold harmless provision is enacted.
Policy	**2. Ensure rural priorities are embedded in MILUS.**
Policy	a. Ensure robust rural participation in MILUS development and implementation so that the final strategy guarantees fair and equitable distribution of housing, conservation, clean energy, and economic development priorities across the Commonwealth and does not concentrate burdens in rural regions without commensurate benefits.
Policy	b. Develop tools such as a local add-on taxes, rural emergency response infrastructure grants, or outdoor recreation investment grants – that support rural emergency response and stewardship infrastructure in communities that host significant outdoor recreation and clean energy burdens.
Funding	c. Ensure that rural communities are not required to take extra steps to apply for discretionary grants if and when the MILUS prioritized land use conflicts with local priorities.
Policy; Funding	d. Allow all rural municipalities to identify appropriate growth centers where further land conservation and clean energy/data center siting will not occur, and prioritize One Stop for Growth and other funding for development of these areas for rural economic and housing growth.
Policy	**3. Safeguard rural municipalities from resource-draining clean energy, battery storage and data centers.**
Policy	a. Ensure updates to MassEnviroScreen and the Mass Clean Energy Infrastructure Site Suitability Mapping Tool accurately reflect and consider the conditions in rural communities so that these tools guide an equitable build out of clean energy infrastructure.
Programming	b. Provide rural municipalities with technical, legal, and planning support to update zoning and bylaws for clean energy, battery storage and data centers ensuring that projects are sited, sized and conditioned to protect public safety, water resources, habitat, and the long-term viability of agriculture and forestry and address noise, traffic, energy demand, climate resilience, tax policy, and community benefit agreements.
Programming; Funding	c. Provide rural municipalities with support for ongoing monitoring and management of battery storage systems including emergency response equipment and staffing.

Land Use (cont.)	
Category	**Recommendation**
Programming	d. Create an Office of Rural Negotiation in the Attorney General's Office to provide legal and technical assistance to rural municipalities with limited capacity that are faced with large battery storage or data center development proposals.
Policy	e. Encourage regionally coordinated approaches to data-center siting that align with land use, climate, and energy strategies to avoid concentrating environmental and infrastructure burdens in a few rural communities.
Programming	**4. Help rural communities with land use planning and climate resiliency.**
Programming; Funding	a. Provide sustained technical and financial assistance to Regional Planning Agencies to help rural municipalities update zoning, subdivision regulations, and comprehensive plans to support compact, mixed-use development in town centers while protecting priority agricultural and forest lands.
Programming	b. Support regional planning agencies and conservation partners to lead inland and coastal resilience planning that prioritizes nature-based solutions including wetland and stream restoration, tree planting, and green stormwater infrastructure to reduce flooding and heat exposure; right sizing culverts and small bridges; improvements to water infrastructure so it can withstand future climate conditions; and integrates land use, transportation, and climate adaptation..
Programming	c. Monitor and replicate the successes learned from the MDAR-funded SRPEDD, OCPC, and Wildlands Trust initiative that is providing technical assistance and resources to municipalities navigating Chapter 61A transitions.
Policy	d. Allow multiyear timelines and regional approaches to land use and climate resiliency planning so that towns with limited staff have time to thoroughly consider strategies and impacts and engage stakeholders; encourage zoning reforms that are coordinated across shared geographies such as watersheds, river valleys, and shared transportation corridors.
Funding; Programming	e. Ensure that implementation of the ResilientMass Finance Strategy and the Mass Ready Act's Resilience Revolving Fund prioritizes rural resilience projects and provides technical assistance, and accessible, low cost financing terms that reflect the limited fiscal and staff capacity of rural communities.
Programming; Funding	**5. Expand technical assistance and support for working lands and climate impacts.**
Programming; Funding	a. Expand technical assistance and financial support for farms and forests adapting to climate change and new markets, including help with diversification, new crops and species, regenerative practices, and succession planning. i. Encourage and expand the capacity of the Commonwealth's public and private universities, including UMass Amherst, to engage directly with rural communities and working lands on applied research and technical assistance that supports climate smart agriculture, forestry, and land management. ii. Ensure that major earmarks—such as the Future of Food investment at UMass—include concrete partnerships with area farms and food businesses to increase the viability of agriculture and food systems in western and central Massachusetts, not only research or campus focused initiatives.
Funding	b. Consistently capitalize the Disaster Relief Fund and related programs so that farmers and rural businesses can recover from microbursts, flooding, drought, and other climate related events without permanently losing productive land or operations.

Land Use (cont.)	
Category	**Recommendation**
Legislative; Funding	**6. Codify, support and expand the Office of Outdoor Recreation.**
Legislative; Funding	a. Codify, sustain and expand the Office of Outdoor Recreation and ensure its programs explicitly benefit rural regions that depend heavily on trails, waterways, forests, and open space for their economies and quality of life.
Programming	b. Strengthen collaboration between the Office of Outdoor Recreation, tourism agencies, and economic development entities so investments in outdoor recreation support local business development, workforce opportunities, and infrastructure in nearby village centers.
Funding	c. Use federal NTIA funds secured by the Massachusetts Broadband Institute or MOTT Capital funds within MassLeads to assist rural municipalities with health, safety, and amenity needs associated with outdoor recreation – including cell coverage on key corridors (including water corridors), restroom and parking facilities, wayfinding, and adequate emergency response capacity.
Funding	**7. Support the economic potential of agriculture and woodlot management.**
Funding	a. Provide financial tools such as grants, loans, or revenue bonds for infrastructure that expands the economic potential of agriculture and woodlot management, such as meat and poultry processing, grain and food hubs, and forest products facilities.
Programming	b. Expand agricultural and forestry programming and curriculum at Vocational Technical High Schools to ensure that the Commonwealth cultivates a new generation of farmers and foresters.
Programming	c. Continue to support and promote MDAR's Farm Pass transition planning program to assist with farmer succession.

Municipal Sustainability	
Category	**Recommendation**
Funding	**1. Revise state funding formulas that primarily use population for distribution.**
Legislative	a. Codify changes to Chapter 90.
Funding	b. Increase Rural School Aid and revise Chapter 70 formula to remove factors that skew outliers due to sparse population.
Legislative; Funding	c. Unrestricted General Government Aid (UGGA) which has not kept up with inflation and rising municipal costs, has no cogent distribution formula. The allocation and amount of UGGA funding needs legislative review and address.
Funding	**2. Revise the Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) structure or create a different reimbursement program for state-owned-land (SOL).**
Funding	**3. Eliminate the use of zip codes to distribute state funding.** Due to sparse population density, many rural municipalities share zip codes, which results in over and under counting and inequitable distribution of funding.
Legislative; Funding	**4. Create a Municipal Building Authority and grant/loan fund to assist rural municipalities with technical assistance, municipal building maintenance and construction, including public safety facilities.** Decades of deferred maintenance, driven in part by inequitable state and federal funding formulas, have prevented rural municipalities from implementing capital improvement plans. Rural needs should be prioritized as the program is developed. (Multiple bills were filed to create a Public Safety Building Authority were filed in the 2025-26 legislative session and are currently moving through the legislature.)
Funding	**5. Expand and tailor local-option revenue tools so they are usable in rural contexts.**
Legislative; Funding	a. Existing options tied to meals, hotel rooms, or cannabis sales do not adequately benefit most rural communities but options like the creation of an Outdoor Recreation local option tax could provide more revenue to struggling rural municipalities.
Legislative; Funding	**6. Examine the Commonwealth's tax structures overall to revise how state and local government is funded.** Local property taxes fund an ever-growing share of municipal operations in rural municipalities, despite the regressive nature of property taxation and limits on the revenue that can be raised under Proposition 2½ and within residents' ability to pay.
Legislative	**7. Revise the prevailing wage law to make wage rates more geographically sensitive and to create exemptions for small projects.** Elimination and revisions to prevailing wage has been a municipal plea since the law was enacted. These compromises are reasonable and fair to both workers and to municipalities.
Policy	**8. Establish and permanently resource a rural policy coordination function to advance rural equity across state government.** The Commonwealth should establish a durable rural-policy coordination function with authority to convene relevant secretariats and agencies, assess the rural impacts of statewide policies and programs, and coordinate implementation of cross-cutting rural priorities. The function should:
Programming	a. Convene relevant secretariats and agencies on cross-cutting rural issues, including housing, water and wastewater, transportation, education, municipal finance, workforce, health, land use, climate resilience, broadband, and emergency services.
Programming	b. Review major proposed state programs, grant opportunities, regulations, data tools, and implementation schedules for rural eligibility, accessibility, capacity implications, and unintended effects before release.

Municipal Sustainability (cont.)	
Category	**Recommendation**
Programming	c. Identify opportunities to align agency deadlines, match requirements, reporting expectations, and technical-assistance resources so rural municipalities are not forced to choose among important opportunities or excluded by administrative capacity constraints.
Programming	d. Maintain a statewide rural-policy implementation agenda, including measurable priorities, agency responsibilities, timelines, and regular public progress reporting.
Programming	e. Elevate unresolved cross-agency barriers to the Governor's Office and, where appropriate, recommend legislative or budgetary action to the Governor and Legislature.
Programming	f. Establish a recurring mechanism for direct consultation with rural municipal, regional, business, nonprofit, and resident stakeholders across all rural typologies.
Programming	**9. Expand and better coordinate education and training programs for municipal careers, with a focus on roles commonly found in small towns (e.g., clerk, treasurer/collector, accountant, assessor, planner, building and public health inspector, public works superintendent, board and commission members).**
Programming	a. Make existing professional association and DLS trainings more frequent, available online, and open to prospective as well as current local officials.
Funding; Programming	b. Provide financial support to rural community colleges to support them in offering credit bearing and certificate programs in local government management, finance, and regulatory administration that are accessible to rural residents, and to vocational technical high schools to offer programs for municipal roles like public works and water and wastewater operation.
Funding; Programming	c. Expand financial support for internships, apprenticeships, fellowships, and mentorships in rural municipalities (like the local finance fellowship partnership between the Division of Local Services (DLS) within the Massachusetts Department of Revenue (DOR) and community colleges, and the Massachusetts Municipal Association partnership with Suffolk University that offers graduate-level certificate programs to local government employees) that can place emerging professionals in small towns.
Programming	**10. Recognize and support a culture of service and civic volunteering in rural communities with deliberate efforts to engage residents from diverse ages, backgrounds, and identities in local decision-making.**
Programming	a. Develop statewide and regional campaigns that highlight the importance and impact of serving in local government on boards, commissions, and committees.
Programming	b. Provide simple tools rural towns can use to recruit, orient, and support new volunteers. These could include developing a standardized but adaptable Citizen Academy curriculum and providing information about how to address liability concerns related to local high school students or scout trips offering childcare services at municipal meetings.
Programming	c. Create training programs for volunteers that fill critical municipal roles and need an understanding of Massachusetts regulations and laws.
Legislative	**11. Simplify the process for converting key local offices from elected to appointed status (Treasurer, Tax Collector and Town Clerk, among others) so that towns can establish minimum qualifications, broaden candidate pools, and more easily share positions across municipalities when appropriate.**

Municipal Sustainability (cont.)	
Category	**Recommendation**
Legislative	**12. Expand and simplify ways for municipalities to use retirees, income-limited seniors and other volunteers to fill municipal roles.**
Legislative	a. Codify retiree work limitations for hard-to-fill municipal roles. Allow experienced staff to work more hours in critical positions while longer-term workforce pipelines are being built. (This is built into the Municipal Empowerment Act.)
Funding	b. Expand elder property tax deferrals and senior work off programs.
Policy	a. Pursue amendment of the Massachusetts Labor Displacement Prohibition regulations that currently prohibit volunteers from filling municipal roles
Programming	**13. Explore structural options to sustain local governance in fiscally strained rural areas.**
Funding; Programming	a. Fund a multiyear, state and local research and planning effort to assess models such as voluntary town mergers, the creation of full municipal districts (where multiple towns retain their names and civic identities but operate under a single consolidated local government for all core services) and the reinstatement or expansion of county wide service departments through existing county governments, Council of Governments and/or Regional Planning Agencies, so that rural communities can reliably fund and provide essential services over the long term.
Legislative	b. Revise Chapter 40B, legislation that created Regional Planning Agencies, to broaden their scope and authorities.
Funding; Programming	c. Provide technical assistance and funding for a pilot town merger project between two or more willing and interested rural municipalities.
Funding; Programming	**14. Reestablish and strengthen multi-year Efficiency and Regionalization Grant and technical assistance programs that support the planning, design, startup, capital investment and early operation of shared services.**
Programming; Funding	**15. Incentivize and support targeted reforms in emergency services staffing to promote regional models for police, EMS and fire where call and volunteer systems are no longer sustainable.**
Funding	a. Create multi-year grants or funding mechanisms (see above)
Policy	b. Work with the Massachusetts Insurance Commission to adjust the rubric used by insurance companies to evaluate homeowner access to fire response. Current thresholds prevent fire regionalization even though call fire departments could have a slower response time than staffed departments further away.
Programming; Funding	c. Work with DPH Office of Emergency Medical Services (OEMS) to develop a rural EMT response model that promotes and financially supports regionalized response in rural regions.
Funding	**16. Provide Regional Planning Agencies and county governments that serve rural municipalities with non-competitive and consistent funding to allow them to provide more service to rural municipalities and make county governments eligible for more state grant opportunities.**
Programming	**17. Help rural municipalities evaluate and, where appropriate, jointly procure private vendors for specialized municipal services** (such as financial management, assessing, or certain IT functions), using collective buying power and shared oversight to improve service quality and cost-effectiveness without overburdening local staff.

Public Health	
Category	**Recommendation**
Policy	**1. Ensure rural representation and rural equity in the rollout of SAPHE 2.0 and the Rural Health Transformation Program, and in the expending of state opioid settlement funds.**
Funding	a. Prioritize the continuation of SAPHE 2.0 advancements in local public health training and staffing (including the PHE Grant Program) by increasing state investment in SAPHE 2.0 to $50m from a sustained and predictable state funding source beginning in FY28, when current federal funds are spent out.
Policy	b. Ensure strong rural representation on the revived Special Commission on Local and Regional Health, which is tasked with updating workforce credential requirements and performance standards, and recommending funding strategies.
Policy	c. Ensure strong representation from the MA Health Data Tool's Rural Level 1 and 2 communities in the proposed RHTP advisory and workgroup structure so that program design and implementation reflect the realities of all kinds of rural communities.
Funding	d. Prioritize a rural carve-out or target percentage in state funding for opioid use disorder prevention, harm reduction, treatment and recovery services funded by the national opioid settlement. Additional state investments in rural communities will address the gap created by the national formula, which compounds their infrastructure challenges.
Programming	e. Incentivize regional efforts for opioid settlement programming and services.
Funding	**2. Use RHTP to stabilize and expand core rural health services.**
Funding; Programming	a. Direct a significant share of RHTP funding to sustaining and expanding access to essential services in rural areas—primary care, urgent and emergency care, EMS (including restoration of funding to regional EMS Councils), Mobile Integrated Health (MIH), behavioral health, dental care, and maternal and child health—through facility upgrades, Community Paramedicine, mobile or hub-and-spoke models, and strengthened hospitals and health centers.
Policy	b. Track and improve access measures such as drivetime and transportation supports to key services and availability of mobile or visiting providers, and prioritize investments that bring care closer to residents rather than relying solely on regional consolidation.
Funding; Programming	**3. Invest in prevention, community partnerships, and social drivers of health.**
Funding; Programming	a. Dedicate a meaningful portion of RHTP and related resources to community-based prevention and community health improvement planning that address aging and dementia needs; mental health; substance use; food security; chronic disease; injury prevention; social connectedness; and other social drivers of health in rural communities, using approaches such as school-based programs, regional collective impact coalitions, and cross-sector partnerships.
Programming	b. Leverage PHE program staff and training infrastructure as well as RHTP investments to strengthen rural health emergency preparedness and response capacity, including training, regional coordination, and surge planning for public health emergencies, natural disasters, and other events that can disproportionately strain small systems.
Funding; Policy	c. Ensure that implementation of the RHTP and continuation of the PHE program are accompanied by funding and capacity increases commensurate with any new standards, expectations, or regionalization efforts, so rural public health entities are not simply handed additional responsibilities without the resources to meet them.

Public Health (cont.)	
Category	**Recommendation**
Programming	**4. Build a stronger rural health and public health workforce pipeline to improve rural health outcomes and to strengthen the rural workforce and economy.** .
Programming	a. Develop "grow-your-own" workforce pathways by partnering with community colleges, vocational and technical schools, high schools, elder services organizations, and MassHire to provide local training, clinical rotations, and laddered credentials that prepare rural residents for health and public health careers without requiring relocation.
Programming	b. Implement the 2026 MA DPH Office of Local and Regional Health's Local Public Health Academy Strategic Plan in a way that assures geographic equity and access.
Policy	c. Use new statewide SAPHE 2.0 annual municipal and workforce survey data to inform future training.
Programming; Funding	**5. Support targeted reforms in emergency services staffing to promote regional models for EMS, fire, and police where call and volunteer systems are no longer sustainable.** Refer to Municipal Sustainability Recommendations for more detail.
Funding; Programming	**6. Strengthen rural, regional public health service delivery through DPH's consistent distribution of funds.** The MA Department of Public Health uses different regional configurations to distribute its funding for emergency preparedness, tobacco control, chronic disease reduction, and Public Health Excellence grants, and distributes other funding by municipality, like Opioid settlement funds. Public health service delivery would be improved and more efficient if DPH settled on a single definition of "region" such as by county boundaries (especially in areas where county governments still exists).
Programming	**7. Expand telehealth and digital tools while preserving in-person options.**
Programming	a. Promote telehealth, remote monitoring, and digital triage tools that are specifically designed to function in rural broadband environments and on a range of devices, including smartphones, while aligning them with privacy and security standards.
Policy	b. Ensure that telehealth expansion under RHTP complements, rather than replaces, in-person services for residents with limited connectivity, digital literacy, or private space, and coordinate with broadband and digital equity initiatives described elsewhere in this Plan.

Technology, Broadband, and Digital Resilience	
Category	**Recommendation**
Funding	**1. Complete universal broadband access.**
Funding	a. Use state bond funds to close remaining "last mile" and gap areas in rural regions, prioritizing solutions that meet or exceed broadband standards and avoid long-term reliance on satellite for year-round residents.
Funding	b. Establish a targeted, one-time rural connection "drop" fund to help households and small businesses cover the cost of connecting from the road to the premises in towns served by municipal fiber, other Fiber to the Home networks, and cable networks, especially where residents did not opt in during initial build-out because of up-front costss.
Funding	c. Create a state-level affordability program modeled on the former Affordable Connectivity Program to provide monthly broadband discounts for low- and moderate-income rural households and explore open-access or other models that increase competition and transparency in rural markets.
Policy	d. Broaden 220 CMR 45.00 to address barriers to broadband expansion and competition resulting from the current make-ready process in Massachusetts. The Department of Telecommunications and Cable and the Department of Public Utilities should promulgate final regulations through the current joint proceeding to adopt one touch make ready, self help remedies and strict timelines for each phase of the make-ready process.
Funding; Programming	**2. Treat cybersecurity capacity as critical rural infrastructure.**
Funding	a. Explicitly recognize municipal IT systems, public safety communications, and essential local applications as critical infrastructure in state policy and funding frameworks, and prioritize rural municipalities for cyber readiness grants and technical assistance.
Policy; Funding	b. Develop simple, tiered cybersecurity standards and implementation guides tailored to small municipalities, and link grant eligibility and cyber insurance to adoption of basic practices such as multifactor authentication, regular backups, patch management, and phishing training.
Programming	**3. Treat municipal IT capacity as critical rural infrastructure.**
Policy; Funding	a. Explicitly recognize municipal IT systems, public safety communications, and essential local applications as critical infrastructure in state policy and funding frameworks, and prioritize rural municipalities for cyber readiness grants and technical assistance.
Programming	b. Support regionalized IT services—through RPAs, councils of governments, or multi town consortia—that can provide shared staff for multiple rural communities that cannot sustain full-time in-house IT departments.
Policy	**4. Plan proactively for data-intensive infrastructure, including large data centers.** (See Land Use recommendation #4 for additional detail.)
Programming	**5. Support and implement rural Digital Equity Plans that bundle device distribution, digital literacy, and outreach, using libraries, senior centers, schools, and regional hubs as primary delivery sites.**
Funding	a. Fund the reopening of MBI's Municipal Digital Equity Planning and Implementation Programs.

Technology, Broadband, and Digital Resilience (cont.)	
Category	**Recommendation**
Legislative; Policy	b. Advance H.100 "An Act establishing a commission to study a statewide credentialing program for digital navigators". Develop a statewide standard credential for Digital Navigators (a Digital Navigator is a trained guide who helps community members, especially the elderly, access affordable internet, obtain devices, and build essential digital skills).
Programming	c. Promote rural access to digital skills programs such as "Grow with Google" and similar initiatives through libraries, schools, workforce boards, and community organizations, tying these efforts to broadband, device access, and local industry needs.
Funding; Programming	**6. Improve rural mobile coverage and integrate communications into core infrastructure planning.**
Programming	a. Provide model bylaws and technical assistance so rural municipalities can modernize zoning that currently restricts or effectively bans cell infrastructure, balancing visual concerns with current safety and economic needs. Prioritize efforts along utility corridors to expedite coverage expansion.
Programming	b. Commission and regularly update a detailed rural cell coverage and performance map to identify "no-service" and "weak-service" areas and guide state, federal, and private investments.
Funding	c. Use NTIA, MassWorks, MassLeads, and related programs to fund new or upgraded cell sites, shared towers, and hybrid WiFi/cellular solutions in rural village centers, outdoor recreation areas, and along key evacuation and emergency corridors.
Policy	d. Encourage co-location of telecommunications infrastructure with transportation, broadband, and energy projects—such as along state highways, rail corridors, and utility rights-of-way—to reduce cost and environmental impacts.
Funding	e. Leverage the MassBroadband 123 middle mile network to build fiber to the tower infrastructure for new tower sites.
Policy	**7. Align emerging technologies—including AI—with rural capacity, equity, and local control.**
Programming	a. Develop statewide guidance and model policies and governance frameworks for ethical and responsible municipal and regional use of AI and automation, covering transparency, bias, privacy, procurement, and human oversight, with specific attention to the needs and constraints of rural governments.
Programming	b. Provide training and technical assistance to help rural officials, schools, and regional entities identify appropriate, high-value uses of AI (such as grant support, document drafting, and customer service) while safeguarding against over-reliance or inequitable impacts.
Policy; Funding	c. Ensure that new data-sharing or technology requirements linked to health, education, or public administration initiatives include funding and capacity-building for rural entities, so small organizations can participate without being overburdened.

Transportation	
Category	**Recommendation**
Legislative; Funding	**1. Permanently increase Chapter 90 funding to at least $300 million annually; index all future allocations to inflation; and codify the municipal distribution formula of any funding above $200 million based on road miles only.**
Funding	**2. Maintain, increase and create new funding for uniquely rural transportation challenges.**
Legislative; Funding	a. Codify and expand the Unpaved Roads Grant Program. Because distribution of Chapter 90 has been so inadequate, rural municipalities have never had resources for proper full-depth reconstruction of unpaved roads, which are needed every 20 years just like paved roads. As a result, these roads are increasingly susceptible to storm damage and variable weather conditions.
Funding	b. Maintain increased funding for Small Bridges and Community Culvert Grant Programs.
Funding	c. Expand funding for rural shared roads and paths to provide needed transportation alternatives to rural residents and to encourage greater visitation to rural areas.
Funding	d. Invest in rural electric vehicle fast-charging infrastructure as part of core transportation systems. Prioritize state and utility funding for public and semi-public EV charging stations in rural communities—such as village centers, park-and-ride lots, and key destinations—so that rural residents, workers, and visitors can reliably adopt EVs without facing range anxiety or long detours for charging.
Policy; Programming	**3. Recognize the capacity constraints of rural municipalities and direct state agencies to provide technical assistance and/or simplify, streamline and standardize design, permitting and approval processes for transportation projects.**
Policy	a. Direct MassDOT and DEP to work together to streamline the project design, permitting and approval process for small bridges and culverts. The regulatory process for small stream crossing replacements is especially burdensome for under-resourced rural communities, delaying projects that are critical for public safety, ecological health, and climate resilience; coordinated reforms should simplify requirements, improve transparency, provide standardized designs for specific culvert types and shorten timelines to construction (that also has the benefit of minimizing inflation-based price escalation) while maintaining environmental protections.
Funding; Programming	b. Expand and institutionalize funding assistance for project development and engineering for rural roads. Programs such as MassDOT's LEAP initiative, which provides needed and appreciated technical and pre-construction support to rural municipalities and Gateway Cities, should be made permanent, scaled beyond the initial three-year, $1 million-per-year structure, and complemented by similar capacity-building tools to ensure that rural communities can plan, design, and deliver projects that leverage state and federal funds.
Programming; Funding	**4. Continue to support, expand and enhance community transit, microtransit and other flexible services provided by rural RTAs and local partners.**
Programming	a. Smaller vehicles, on-demand and demand-response scheduling, and cross-sector partnerships are often the most effective way to serve dispersed populations and older adults and complement traditional fixed-route services where they exist.
Policy; Funding	b. Ensure that rural RTAs develop and implement a microtransit plan that expands transportation options in rural regions and that the work of and funding to Community Transit Providers and Neighbors groups are complementing and expanding RTA services so that Commonwealth resources are used most efficiently and effectively.

Transportation (cont.)	
Category	**Recommendation**
Programming; Funding	c. Create Park and Ride lots in areas already served by fixed route and microtransit to expand opportunities for transit use.
Funding; Programming	5. **Provide efficient and reliable passenger rail, intercity bus service and other multi-modal connections linking rural areas to one another and to urban centers.** Multi-modal interconnectivity benefits all areas of the Commonwealth but are often ambitious and expensive projects. In the current state and federal financial and political climate, it would be easy to give up on these projects, but they should remain a high priority for the Commonwealth.
Policy	6. **Include rural roadway safety in the statewide Strategic Highway Safety Plan. According to the MassDOT web site, an update of the Plan is underway. Rural stakeholders, if not already included, should be included in the assessment and planning process to ensure that rural safety issues are understood and addressed, perhaps through the formation of a rural safety subcommittee.**
Policy	7. **As the Commonwealth considers an alternative to the gas tax to generate adequate revenue for future transportation safety and maintenance, like congestion pricing and/or vehicle miles traveled (VMT), rural impacts should be carefully examined to ensure fairness and equity for all residents.**

Water and Wastewater	
Category	**Recommendation**
Policy	**1. Integrate water/sewer policy and action with housing, economic development, and climate resiliency initiatives.**
Policy	a. Coordinate with housing and land use programs to ensure that septic and well constraints do not unnecessarily block rural ADUs, small-scale infill, or rehabilitation of underutilized buildings, while still protecting groundwater and surface water resources.
Funding	b. Incorporate drought resilience, PFAS and emerging contaminant risks, and extreme weather vulnerabilities into rural infrastructure funding criteria so that replacement projects also address long-term climate and public health risks.
Programming; Policy	**2. Conduct a statewide water availability study to: examine current water resources and capacity; calculate future needs and availability; assess new and different water technologies such as desalinization; examine the current threats of climate change, drought and PFAS contamination; address address the needs of both water stewards and water users; and recommend a new funding formula for local and state water systems that is not based on water usage.**
	a. Secure legislative support and funding for this critical, large-scale project.
Policy; Programming	b. During this process and before wide-scale expansion of MWRA infrastructure to serve new areas of eastern Massachusetts, cautiously and prudently assess the long-term health, viability and capacity of the Quabbin Reservoir to ensure it is protected and better serves all areas of Massachusetts. i. During this process and before wide-scale expansion of MWRA infrastructure to serve new areas of eastern Massachusetts, cautiously and prudently assess the long-term health, viability and capacity of the Quabbin Reservoir to ensure it is protected and better serves all areas of Massachusetts ii. Expand the MWRA Board to include more representation from Quabbin communities and western Massachusetts.
Funding; Programming	c. Expand and institutionalize funding assistance for project development and engineering for rural roads. Programs such as MassDOT's LEAP initiative, which provides needed and appreciated technical and pre-construction support to rural municipalities and Gateway Cities, should be made permanent, scaled beyond the initial three-year, $1 million-per-year structure, and complemented by similar capacity-building tools to ensure that rural communities can plan, design, and deliver projects that leverage state and federal funds.
Funding	**3. Create and sustain a dedicated rural water, wastewater and stormwater infrastructure program.**
Funding	a. Establish a state-funded, rural-focused water, wastewater and stormwater infrastructure program that supports planning, design, construction, and maintenance for small systems and unserved communities, building on the 2019 recommendation for a dedicated funding stream.
Funding	b. Ensure eligibility for feasibility studies, asset management planning, and engineering for small projects that are too small to be competitive in existing state and federal programs but critical for local village centers and business districts.
Funding	c. Prioritize projects that provide regional benefits, serve multiple districts or communities, or address clusters of small non-community public water systems where system failure would have outsized economic impacts.
Policy	**4. Advance rural-appropriate reforms to Title 5 and onsite Wastewater rules.**
Programming; Policy	a. Work collaboratively with DEP, local boards of health, and rural stakeholders to pilot modest Title 5 changes to better enable development of ADUs, cluster development and other types of clustered housing in rural areas, such as approaches that reflect actual household size, soil conditions, and deed-restricted maximum occupancy while maintaining health and environmental standards.

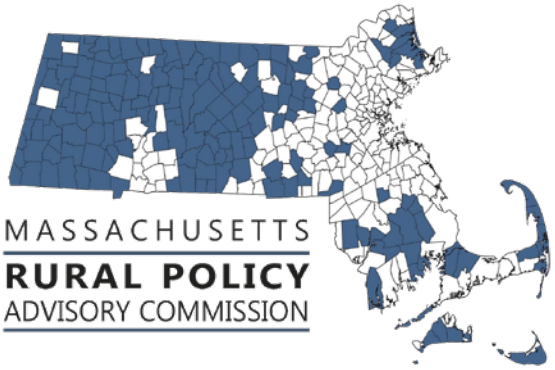
Water and Wastewater (cont.)	
Category	**Recommendation**
Programming	**5. Support small public water systems and village centers.**
Programming	a. Develop clear, written step-by-step guidance and templates to foster economic development by helping small businesses and communities transition from private wells to public water supplies, with predictable timelines and expectations. Provide technical assistance to small businesses with water testing requirements.
Policy	b. Evaluate where and under what conditions smaller wellhead protection radii or alternative treatment technologies could be allowed in compact village centers to enable modest business and housing growth while managing risk.
Funding; Programming	c. Expand financial and technical assistance for small public water systems, including support for PFAS monitoring and treatment, asset management, leak detection, and GPS mapping of infrastructure.
Programming	d. Direct DEP or Mass Water to provide evidence-based/data-driven assistance for development of long-term maintenance and upgrade plans and a corresponding revenue forecast and formula to help local rural water and wastewater commissioners set reasonable, appropriate local rates.
Programming; Funding	**6. Expand support for innovative and small-scale treatment technologies.**
Funding	a. Increase state support for the Massachusetts Alternative Septic System Test Center (MASSTC) so it can address a wider range of soils and conditions statewide and accelerate testing of small-scale, rural-appropriate technologies.
Policy; Funding	b. Encourage and streamline permitting for small, shared treatment systems, cluster systems, and modular plants that can serve village centers and small developments where full-scale plants are not financially or operationally feasible. Create loans, grants and incentives to promote shared systems.
Funding	c. Provide capital planning and pre-development funding for small public water supplies.
Policy	d. Recognize source-separation sanitation (composting, urine-diverting, incinerating, evaporative, and vacuum-flush systems) as a parallel infrastructure pathway for rural communities that could be evaluated alongside septic, I/A systems, cluster systems, and sewer.
Programming	**7. Build rural technical assistance and operator capacity.**
Programming; Funding	a. Increase DEP and partner-agency technical assistance staffing dedicated to rural areas without public sewer and water, with a focus on helping small systems plan, design, and fund infrastructure replacements and compliance upgrades.
Programming; Funding	b. Support expanded training and workforce development pathways for certified water and wastewater operators that are tailored to different learning styles and accessible through community colleges, vocational schools, UMass and other higher education partners, with stable funding so successful programs are not lost when short-term grants end. Engage the Commonwealth's designated rural-policy coordination lead as a partner in identifying rural training needs and ensuring that programs are accessible to very small and low-capacity systems.
Policy	c. DEP should continue to allow individual operators to serve multiple small systems and should review rules such as the 100-mile radius and response-time requirements to determine where they can be expanded or made more flexible for large rural regions while still protecting public health.

Water and Wastewater (cont.)	
Category	**Recommendation**
Programming	**8. Strengthen governance and regional collaboration.**
Legislative	a. Pursue targeted legislative changes to modernize governance of rural water and sewer districts, including clearer borrowing authority, flexibility to appoint commissioners from outside district boundaries where appropriate, and improved tools to collect user fees and manage delinquencies.
Programming	b. Encourage exploration of alternative organizational models—including integration of districts into municipal government where locally desired—to improve wages, benefits, and administrative support for small systems.
Programming; Funding	c. Promote regional planning and interconnection projects that enhance drought resilience, emergency backup supplies, and operational efficiency, with grant criteria that explicitly reward multi-system and multi-town collaborations.

APPENDIX C:
ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACS	American Community Survey (US Census Bureau)
ADU	Accessory Dwelling Unit
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ARPA	American Rescue Plan Act
BEAD	Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment
BESS	Battery Energy Storage System
BRPC	Berkshire Regional Planning Commission
CCC	Cape Cod Commission
CDBG	Community Development Block Grant
CMR	Code of Massachusetts Regulations
CMRPC	Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission
CMS	Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services
CNT	Center for Neighborhood Technology
CoMIRS	Commonwealth of Massachusetts Interoperable Radio System
COVID	Coronavirus Disease
CPA	Community Preservation Act
CPHS	Cooperative Public Health Service (FRCOG program)
CVTE	Career/Vocational Technical Education
DESE	Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
DLS	Division of Local Services (within DOR)
DOR	Department of Revenue
DPH	Department of Public Health
EMS	Emergency Medical Services
EMT	Emergency Medical Technician
EOED	Executive Office of Economic Development
EOHLC	Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities
EQV	Equalized Valuation
EV	Electric Vehicle
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
FRCOG	Franklin Regional Council of Governments
FY	Fiscal Year
GPS	Global Positioning System
LEAP	Local Early and Actionable Planning (MassDOT program)
MAPC	Metropolitan Area Planning Council
MARPA	Massachusetts Association of Regional Planning Agencies
MASSTC	Massachusetts Alternative Septic System Test Center

MassDOT	Massachusetts Department of Transportation
MBI	Massachusetts Broadband Institute
MBTA	Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority
MDAR	Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources
MIH	Mobile Integrated Health
MILUS	Massachusetts Integrated Land Use Strategy
MOOR	Massachusetts Office of Outdoor Recreation
MOTT	Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism
MRPC	Montachusett Regional Planning Commission
MVC	Martha's Vineyard Commission
MVPC	Merrimack Valley Planning Commission
MWRA	Massachusetts Water Resources Authority
NMCOG	Northern Middlesex Council of Governments
NPEDC	Nantucket Planning and Economic Development Commission
NTIA	National Telecommunications and Information Administration
OCPC	Old Colony Planning Council
OEMS	Office of Emergency Medical Services (DPH)
PFAS	Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances
PHE	Public Health Excellence (DPH program)
PILOT	Payment in Lieu of Taxes
PVPC	Pioneer Valley Planning Commission
RHTP	Rural Health Transformation Program
RPA	Regional Planning Agency
RPAC	Rural Policy Advisory Commission
RTA	Regional Transit Authority
RTC	Regional Tourism Council
SAPHE	State Action for Public Health Excellence
SHI	Subsidized Housing Inventory
SOL	State-Owned Land
SRPEDD	Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District
UGGA	Unrestricted General Government Aid
US	United States
VMT	Vehicle Miles Traveled



https://www.mass.gov/info-details/rural-policy-advisory-commission-rpac