



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rural areas of Massachusetts face different challenges than the rest of the Commonwealth. Unlike the economic growth engine of Greater Boston, rural areas are dealing with issues such as: small, aging and often declining populations; limited fiscal resources and staffing constraints; inadequate infrastructure and mobility options; and acute public health challenges. To help identify strategies and opportunities to address these issues, the Rural Policy Advisory Commission was created by the state Legislature in 2015 with a mission to “enhance the economic vitality of rural communities.”

Rural communities (those with population densities of less than 500 persons per square mile) comprise 59 percent of the land area in the Commonwealth yet only 13 percent of its population. Totalling 170 communities, rural municipalities are primarily located in western and central Massachusetts, with clusters in the northeast, southeast and the Cape and Islands.

Over a two-year period, the Commission engaged in a comprehensive program of research and outreach including listening sessions at ten locations across the Commonwealth in late 2018 and continuing in 2019 with over 20 focused stakeholder meetings to refine the information and develop the recommendations in this first of its kind Rural Policy Plan for Massachusetts. The key issues identified through this work included:

- Demographic trends and declining populations are the single biggest challenge in rural areas
- Enhancing rural competitiveness depends on upgrading the infrastructure in rural areas
- Economic opportunities and workforce needs are different in rural areas and require different strategies
- Rural areas have unique housing needs, which are not being met
- Education and health care – known as strengths statewide – can be significant challenges in rural areas
- Rural communities struggle to achieve equal access to funding resources and have difficulty attracting professional staff

THE PLAN

The intent of the Rural Policy Plan is to illustrate the unique attributes and challenges faced by rural communities, inform policy makers of existing best-practices and identify a series of recommendations to be explored and implemented under a proposed new Office of Rural Policy.

The report spans 15 distinct focus areas within the categories of Infrastructure, Economy, Community, Governance and Resiliency. Contained within each category and in each specific focus area are a series of prioritized recommendations for further analysis and implementation. From the roughly one hundred suggestions, the Commission identified a set of top priorities that, along with achievable action items, will assist rural communities in the near term.



THE PATH FORWARD

TOP PRIORITIES OF THE RURAL POLICY PLAN

Expand diversity and implement relocation strategies to boost population in rural Massachusetts

Develop a statewide land use plan/growth management strategy

Determine and create a rural factor to adjust state funding formulas

CORE STRATEGIES

Develop municipal capacity and incentives for service sharing

Create a dedicated funding stream for water and sewer infrastructure

Redesign public transportation provision in rural Massachusetts

Develop targeted economic development strategies for rural sectors

Ensure equitable and quality education to children in rural Massachusetts

Address the impacts of climate change in rural Massachusetts by enhancing the capacity of rural lands to provide mitigative solutions

SUSTAINED IMPLEMENTATION

CREATE AN OFFICE OF RURAL POLICY

TOP PRIORITIES

Expand diversity and implement relocation strategies to boost population in rural Massachusetts. While rural towns face declining population – especially in the western reach of the state – the overall population growth in Massachusetts is bolstered by a steady influx of migrants who overwhelmingly locate in urban areas. A multi-faceted strategy is required to make rural Massachusetts a more comfortable, welcoming and inclusive environment. Strategies that could be emulated to attract a more diverse and youthful population can be found in upstate New York, Vermont and Maine.

Develop a statewide land use plan / growth management strategy. Forecasts that portend significant population growth in Boston and continued population decline in rural communities do not present a favorable long-term growth pattern for the state. Boston will face more congestion and higher housing prices while rural communities will struggle to provide basic services to residents. A thoughtful growth strategy that addresses land use, housing and jobs can guide future growth in a more responsible, proactive and conscionable manner, especially in the face of climate change.

Determine and create a rural factor within state funding formulas. State aid for education and road maintenance are vital lifelines to municipalities, however, the allocation formulas must be reviewed and revised to ensure equity to rural Massachusetts. Instituting a permanent rural factor within the Chapter 70 formula will help school districts faced with declining or stagnant enrollments and high transportation costs provide quality education. Adjusting the Chapter 90 program (rural communities receive less funding per mile due to lower population and employment) would provide equity to those citizens most in need of an accessible road network. Any change must consider the impact of seasonal population swells that affect the Cape, Islands, Berkshires and tourist areas.

In addition, this plan outlines many existing best practices, ideas and recommendations for improving the economic vitality of rural communities. Among the prioritized recommendations include:

- **Develop municipal capacity and incentives for service sharing.**
- **Create a dedicated funding stream for water and sewer infrastructure.**
- **Redesign public transportation provision in rural Massachusetts.**
- **Develop targeted economic development strategies for rural sectors.**
- **Ensure equitable and quality education to children in rural Massachusetts.**
- **Address the impacts of climate change in rural Massachusetts by enhancing the capacity of rural lands to provide mitigative solutions.**

Create Office of Rural Policy. The Rural Policy Advisory Commission recommends that the Legislature begin by authorizing and funding an Office of Rural Policy to provide purposed focus on rural issues and advance the recommendations in this Plan. And, whereas the report is intended to be a living document, the Commission itself should be charged with a continuing mission to research and report on issues that impact rural communities.

This Plan presents a bold starting point by which the Legislature and other stakeholders can effectuate needed policy reforms to advance and ensure the long-term economic vibrancy of rural Massachusetts.

