

Chapter 2

Land Use



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Changes in demographics, evolving housing needs, and the economic and conservation needs discussed throughout this plan have had, and will continue to have, a direct impact on the landscape of the community. Land is a finite resource, and the thoughtful use of land is a critical issue for all communities. Since 1976 Littleton has regulated land uses with a zoning ordinance. The Zoning Ordinance is based on the Littleton Master Plan, and NH RSA 674:2 II (B) requires master plans to have a vision and a land use section at a minimum. How a community decides to use its land base clearly has a direct impact on natural resources, on community character, on transportation infrastructure, and on housing affordability, the tax base, and the cost of providing services.

Attitudes toward the land have changed considerably over the past decade. Experience has taught us that land is a complicated resource, and that one parcel of land may be better suited to a particular use than another. Natural factors such as slope, soil, groundwater, and surface water may vary across the landscape and growing communities must take these factors into consideration when planning their future, or face a decreasing quality of life.

Littleton, along with other New Hampshire communities, is growing, especially in terms of commercial development. With this growth come changes in land use. Fields and meadows become residential areas, or commercial sites. Forests are cleared and built upon, and new roads and other services become necessary. Land once considered undesirable for development becomes more attractive as prime sites are consumed. Steep slopes, wetlands, and other sensitive environmental areas become more susceptible to development as land becomes more and more expensive.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify land use trends in Littleton, discuss how regulations impact such trends, and offer recommendations as to what regulatory steps and non-regulatory should be taken in the future to meet the growing housing, economic, environmental, and land use needs of the community.

2.0 EXISTING AND HISTORIC LAND USE PATTERNS

Littleton's existing land use pattern is diverse in nature and consists of a wide array of uses. For the purpose of this master plan the existing land uses have been grouped into generalized categories in order to facilitate a better understanding of Littleton's existing pattern of development. They include:

- Residential
- Commercial/Industrial

- Utilities
- Forestry and Agriculture
- Public and Tax Exempt Lands

Littleton is a product of its location and environment. The Town's natural features such as topography and geology as well as its politics, transportation system, and economics have greatly influenced its development. The development of Littleton into a regional center is a result of its geographic location, and early commercial and manufacturing growth in the community. The Ammonoosuc River provided the early power for manufacturing, and the Town's central location provided easy access for neighboring communities.

Littleton's proximity to the White Mountains ensures its place in the tourist-based economy of the region. The recreational opportunities available within a short drive greatly enhance the success of tourist accommodations and services.

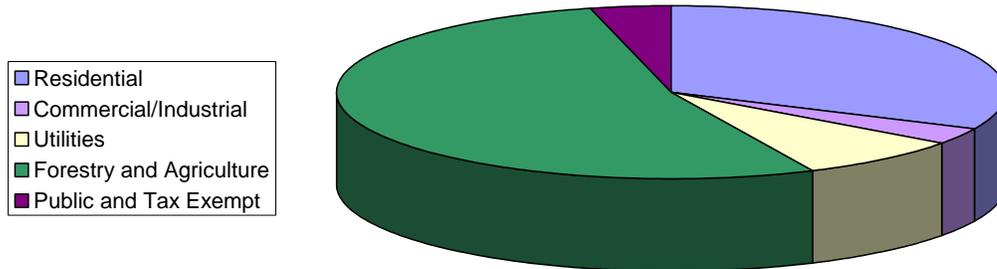
Since the completion of Interstate 93 from Franconia to Interstate 91 in Vermont, accessibility to Littleton has increased dramatically. As a result travel time has decreased from virtually all points in the Northeast. This has resulted in increased residential construction, and commercial and industrial development. The present and future land uses in Littleton will continue to flourish and change due to these factors.

Littleton holds a key position in the development of the North Country. The pressure to develop, from both external and internal forces, makes it imperative that the community plan for its future. Land use in Littleton has changed dramatically over the past twenty years. Table 2A and Figure 2B indicate the present classification of land in Littleton for taxation purposes. Utility lands include property associated with Moore and Comerford Reservoir and the Fifteen-Mile Falls Project.

Table 2A Land Use Classification

Land Use	Acres	Percent
Residential	9,804.30	32%
Commercial/Industrial	965.92	3%
Utilities	2,343.94	8%
Forestry and Agriculture	16,000.74	53%
Public and Tax Exempt	1,329.82	4%
Total Land Area	30,444.72	100%
Total Area (Land & Water)	34,560	

Figure 2B Percent of Littleton Land Area by Use



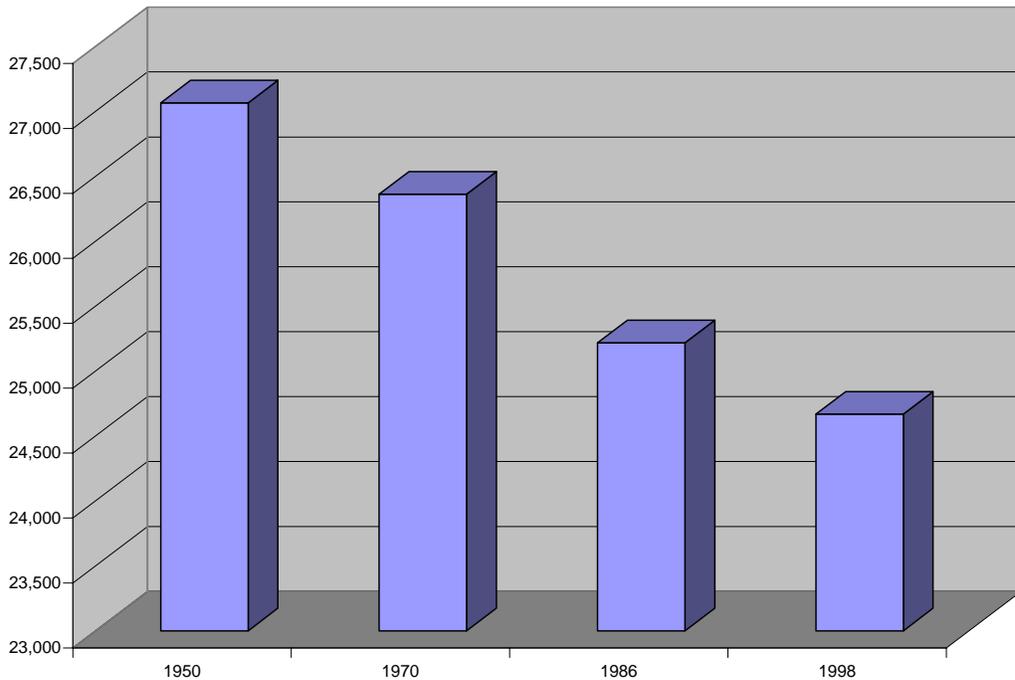
Map A displays the land cover in Littleton. This map provides an image of the existing patterns of development and natural resource systems in the community.

2.1 The Working Landscape

Forestlands are by far the most dominant land use in Littleton. Approximately 53% or 24,669 acres of land is covered by forest. The forests are combinations of softwood and hardwood species which make for diverse uses by the wood products industry. The largest extent of woodlands in Littleton is in the north/northeast sections of Town. The land is predominately steeply sloped and is generally unsuited for other uses. There are also lands throughout the community that were once pasture land, but are now abandoned and in the process of returning to a natural state. Generally land that is presently unsuitable for development due to steepness or inaccessibility remain in woodlands until the pressure to develop, or the demand for the wood exceeds the natural barriers of the land.

The present total of approximately 24,669 acres of forestland is a reduction of 9% or 2,398 acres since 1950. In essence at least 2,398 acres of woodland was taken out of production for an alternative use, most likely a commercial or residential use. This number is probably even higher if you consider the number of acres that converted from farmland to forestland, and were then converted again for another land use.

Figure 2C Reduction in Forest Land Acreage

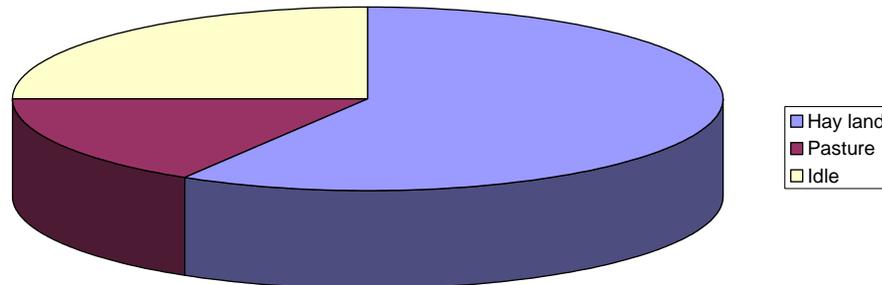


Source: Littleton Natural Resource Inventory, 2002

Agriculture was a major industry in the early 1900's, with over 100 farms in Littleton. By 1982 the number of farms had dwindled to less than half a dozen. The decline in agriculture is attributed, at least in part, to the construction of Moore Dam (which virtually wiped out farming along the Connecticut River), the construction of Interstate 93 (which eliminated a number of farms and farmland), and the potential for higher wages in non-farm professions.

Presently only 3.5%, or 1,258 acres, of Littleton's total land area is in an agricultural use. The 1969 Master Plan total was 3,687 acres. A loss of 2,429 acres to alternate uses or abandonment was realized during this 35 year period. The 1987 Master Plan predicted that if this trend continued, by the year 1995 there would be no agricultural land remaining in Littleton. Although this has not been the case, unprotected agricultural land will continue to be under pressure from development.

Figure 2D Agricultural Lands



Source: Littleton Natural Resource Inventory, 2002

2.2 Residential Lands

Residential land in Littleton is utilized in a number of ways: single-family homes, multi-family dwellings, mobile homes, and seasonal homes. Year-round residential units still dominate the residential usage, but second-home development and land subdivision for speculation is on the increase. The majority of residential units are single-family dwellings concentrated around the downtown area. The trend towards the rehabilitation of large, single-family homes into multi-family dwellings has continued. There is surely a demand for apartments in Littleton.

The Town has classified 9,804 acres, or 32% of the community, as residential. Some of this land also encompasses open space and natural resources. A great deal of residential development has been accommodated around the central business district due to the availability of Town services, but some has also been scattered to rural portions of the community. As more residential development crops up in the rural sections of the community, land becomes fragmented, natural resources are impacted, the character of the community is altered, and services must be extended to meet the needs of these residents.

Present indications (building permits, site plan reviews) imply that multi-family unit development is on the increase. The need for affordable multi-family dwellings exists in Littleton and the surrounding communities. The subdivision of land for future development is also on a steady incline. The continuance of Littleton as a viable area to live, work and eventually to retire to is increasing the development pressure on all land in Littleton today.

2.3 Commercial and Industrial Lands

Approximately 965 acres, or 3% of Littleton's land area, is identified as commercial and industrial. Although the percentage is small, these properties have a dramatic effect on surrounding land use, and contribute to the tax base. The majority of commercial land use is concentrated on Main Street (downtown) and Meadow Street (Route 302) to the Lisbon Line. The commercial uses in Littleton support the needs of local residents as well as other communities in the region.

The Littleton Industrial Park is owned and operated by the Littleton Industrial Development Corporation (LIDC). The Park has the infrastructure to sustain a variety of industrial uses and the accessibility to Interstate 93 has made it a viable site for industrial development. Numerous other industries are located throughout the town, and expansion of these industries is always possible. In addition, Industrial Park facilities being created in Bethlehem and Lisbon should absorb some of the additional industrial development for some time to come while still providing a benefit to the Town of Littleton.

2.4 Public and Quasi-Public Lands

This category includes schools, Town-owned property, churches, federal property, parks, recreational areas, libraries, hospitals, etc. There are approximately 1,329 acres, or 4%, of Town land devoted to public use.

3.0 FUTURE LAND USE

A Future Land Use Plan is a plan for how to guide land use changes in Littleton over time. It establishes land use policy, and can then be implemented by regulatory and non-regulatory means. The framework of open space, the natural constraints (soils, wetlands, floodplains, and steep slopes), the pattern of existing development, the location of infrastructure and services, and the amount and type of growth anticipated or desired suggest the basic options open to the community. Within these opportunities and limitations, alternative patterns and policies for future growth are considered. The Future Land Use Plan consists of two major components – the future land use map and the future land use policies.

Land use policies should be based on the conditions identified during the development of the master plan, and on community goals and objectives. These policies should encourage development in areas that can accommodate it, and have been designated for preferred growth.

The ability of future development to protect and enhance Littleton's community character is an issue of both location and design.

The following proposed Future Land Use Plan for Littleton has been developed by the Littleton Master Plan Committee using the following information:

- * The recently completed Community Attitude Survey.
- * Feedback from the public visioning session held in March of 2004
- * The inventory information, land use implications, and policy actions compiled in this Master Plan.

The plan is intended to achieve the following:

- * Protect Littleton's valuable natural resources areas by basing future growth on the land's ability to accommodate it.
- * Provide adequate areas for industrial, commercial, residential, and public service growth for the next 5 - 10 years.
- * Provide areas for the continuation of recreational activities, such as hiking, canoeing, fishing, etc.
- * Protect Littleton's aesthetic values to insure its continued natural beauty which is important to its residents and its tourist-based economy.

- * Protect Littleton's working landscape while providing adequate opportunities for continued forest-based and agriculture-based operations.
- * Provide for a wide variety of housing types - mobile homes, apartments, multi-family, seasonal homes, single family homes, etc.
- * Target most growth to the existing "urban" areas in order to minimize future costs for expanding public services and to minimize energy usage by locating residences, shops, and town services in close proximity to one another.

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the way they are now.*

3.1 Littleton's Future Land Use Plan – Key Themes and Opportunities

Throughout this master planning process the message from Littleton residents is that they generally like things the way they are now. However, there is a need to accommodate future development in the community. The existing developed areas will be further developed and re-developed as opportunities arise, and new areas will be brought before the residents for consideration. It is important that the land use regulations guide the implementation of the master plan findings as this happens, and that the Future Land Use Plan serve as the guiding vision.

The future land use plan has identified opportunity areas, beyond the existing developed areas of the community, that can accommodate future development. The factors used in developing this plan include existing land use patterns, established goals and objectives, and the natural capability of the land. In designating areas for future land use, the general philosophy is to protect Littleton's unique character and its natural resource base while at the same time providing future growth areas for homes, businesses, industry, and municipal services.

The five opportunity areas in Littleton include:

- The Commercial Zone off of Exit 44
- Rural development activity throughout the community
- Intown residential opportunities
- The Tri-Town Industrial Park on the Brook Road
- Land adjacent to Exit 43 of Interstate 93

Exit 44 Commercial Zone

There are several existing commercial areas in Littleton: the Downtown, the Meadows, along sections of Union and Cottage Streets. Each has its own unique characteristics, needs, advantages, and challenges. Currently there exists, on paper, a Commercial III zoning district along Routes 93 and 18 as they cross into Vermont. Although there is some commercial activity in the vicinity of Old Partridge Lake Road, the zoning district includes a much larger area, including lands that are associated with the Moore Dam. These are unlikely ever to be developed as commercial areas, both because of the apparent lack of demand and because of the land's ownership and the regulations that are associated with the dam.

The general thought was that this Commercial Zone at the state line should be reduced in size to reflect the existing business activity, and the remainder re-designated as a Rural Zone.

Rural Development

Some of the rural land in Littleton is unsuited for high intensity uses such as homes, roads, commercial buildings, etc. Included in these areas are slopes over 15 degrees, wetlands, and floodplains. Development of these areas would lead to excessive expenditures of public funds to provide services and could lead to environmental degradation. Many of these areas have remained undeveloped due to their natural limitations and they should remain as such. Other portions of the rural zone contain valuable natural resources and working lands. There is a need to provide development opportunities on the suitable lands without negatively impacting the resources that make these areas so special to the community. Land along the Dalton Road is a perfect example of this.

One technique for balancing development and conservation in rural areas is Open Space Development. Currently part of the local land use regulations. This technique has not been used due to a lack of direct incentives for the developer, and hesitation by the land use boards to promote the use of open space developments.

This development tool involves the grouping of homes on one part of the land while the remaining land is left as open space. This open space could be used for agriculture, recreation, managed woodland, etc. The open space is then permanently protected by a conservation easement, or some similarly binding legal document.

Adequate provisions for sewage disposal, water, roadways, etc. must be made. This method is not only very successful in protecting land for open space, but is also allows the owners to retain the economic value of the land.

This method also reduces the developer's building costs, reduces road building requirements, and creates a more efficient use of land. The efficient use of land maintains the visual appeal

important to the quality of life and the tourist industry. This technique can also be applied to commercial, industrial, and mixed use developments.

The rural residential areas of Littleton provide an area for low density housing of a wide variety of types, including single-family homes, duplexes, seasonal homes, cottages, and manufactured housing. These low density traditional residential developments should continue to be an option, but should not be the only option for residential development. Home-based commercial activity could be allowed, such as home occupations, or even a corner "mom and pop" store that could service the needs of the area residents. However, no activities should be allowed that would generate extensive traffic to or through these areas.

The areas designated as rural residential vary as to their ability to support homes, roads, septic systems, etc. And since these areas will not generally be serviced by public water and sewer, the development density within these areas should fluctuate occurring to the capability of the land to support it. Detailed soils information is the best available measure of land capability; lot sizes in these areas should be determined by the type of soil present. The density of housing units should be higher on the better soils (well drained, level, deep, etc.) than on poorer soils (permeability, etc.).

In summary, the plan recommends that the current gross densities permitted under the Rural Zone be retained (3 acres per house lot), but that techniques and incentives be developed to make open space subdivisions a more attractive alternative for developers.

Intown Residential

Most of the downtown area provides for higher density residential growth. These are areas close to schools, churches and stores, and are convenient to public services such as fire and police. A new area on the northern edge of the downtown, near the reservoir, has been identified as the potential location for future intown residential development. Single-family homes, duplexes, townhouses, condominiums, and multi-family apartments should be encouraged due to the availability of water and sewer in these areas. Further commercial development, such as motels, restaurants, and retail shops, should not be allowed in order to maintain a safe and quiet residential atmosphere. Future developments should provide adequate recreation / open space for the inhabitants, especially children. Additionally, internal roadways, parking, drainage, lighting, etc. should be carefully designed before a proposal is approved.

In reviewing the site constraints map, there appears to be level land in the vicinity of Farr Hill Road and west of the reservoir that might be developed at the more intense levels permitted under the Residential I Zoning District. These would need to be carefully developed at first to the upper limits of the current water service district, but, over time, there may be an opportunity to place a tank above the current reservoir elevation, and service even more residential lots on an "intown" basis.

The intent here is to provide diverse choices of residential unit types for future households in Littleton, both those in rural areas and those closer to the existing community center. This site west of the current reservoir and near Farr Hill Road appears to provide one of the best opportunities for intown, serviced lots.

Tri-Town Industrial Park

The location of future industry in Littleton is extremely important, even though the amount of land involved may be small. With little land remaining in Littleton for future industrial development the Town has taken a proactive step. Partnering with the towns of Lisbon and Bethlehem, Littleton has initiated a Tri-Town Industrial Park. Although the location of the facility will be in the Town of Bethlehem on the Brook Road, Littleton will be involved in the development; and necessary infrastructure improvements throughout the process and will share the resulting revenue.

The plan recommends continuing to work on these multi-town industrial parks, with the initial focus on the Brook Road Site, and with a secondary focus on lands in Lisbon on the Mount Eustis Road.

Exit 43

As the activities of 2003 and 2004 have shown, there is a great deal of interest in development in and around Exit 43 from Interstate 93. This was clearly a topic of considerable interest in the March 2004 elections. The majority of voters were willing to accept large scale commercial development, but not in sufficient numbers to meet the percentage required to change the existing development regulations.

This has been a difficult and intense discussion in Littleton, with strong views expressed both for and against activity here. In many of the public sessions, even those with the strongest concerns have expressed a willingness to discuss some development here, but development in a controlled manner - development subject to some level of growth and development controls.

This issue is not going to resolve itself, and it is not going to go away. Rather than permitting the current debate to continue, this plan recommends that a dialogue be developed with those both for and against the development. For a brief time in the fall of 2003 the Planning Board appeared poised to endorse some **limited** degree of site plan review regulations for only those projects of a sufficient scale that, should they be pursued by an uncooperative developer, the potential for negative impacts could be significant.

This plan recommends that a limited degree of development controls be placed on projects where the building square footage exceeds 40,000 square feet, and that these be focused on the area in and around Exit 43.