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South County Edition

Vision 2020

A five-part news article series about Washington County.
Rhode Island from The Providence Journal South County news bureau by Tiffany Bartish.
Washington County includes the nine towns of southern Rhode Island. The county is known for its rural landscapes, small towns and scenic beaches and is a popular destination for tourists from throughout southern New England. Washington County is also changing rapidly. The county is experiencing the fastest rate of growth anywhere in Rhode Island.

In 1999, the Washington County Regional Planning Council—a group of officials from Charlestown, Exeter, Hopkinton, New Shoreham, Narragansett, North Kingstown, Richmond, South Kingstown, Westerly, The Washington Trust Co. and URI's Rhode Island Sea Grant Program—realized that the region's rapid growth was beginning to threaten the very quality of life that attracted residents and tourists to the area. They initiated a visioning process, conducting numerous workshops and interviews to identify individual's concerns and hopes for the future of the area.

These articles provide information about growth and its impacts in Washington County, and was designed to make readers aware of the issues shaping the future of the region's towns and villages. The articles were written by Journal staff writer Tiffany Bartish with assistance from Rhode Island Sea Grant outreach scientist, Alan Desbonnet.

The news article series discuss the issues which Vision 2020 was built around. *A Shared Future: Washington County in 2020* articulates, for the first time, a future-oriented vision for the county. During the next year, the council and other partners will use the vision to promote actions that will move the county towards an attractive and more sustainable future.
Controlling growth

WHAT DO WE, AS A REGION, WANT TO BE WHEN WE GROW UP?

It's a question people all over South County seem to be asking themselves and responding in various ways.

Town officials are working on growth-management plans; residents are mourning as their favorite local spots give way to new houses; developers and business owners, whose very livelihoods depend on the area around them, are analyzing their opportunities.

It's no news flash that development in South County has reached unprecedented proportions, with Washington County surpassing every other region in Rhode Island in population growth and development rates.

And the boom has forced locals to realize that, without planning, the future of South County may be a far cry from the small-town landscapes they envision.

In response, town officials from Charlestown, Exeter, Hopkinton, New Shoreham, Narragansett, North Kingstown, Richmond, South Kingstown and Westerly — with assistance from The Washington Trust Co. and URI's Rhode Island Sea Grant Program — created the Washington County Regional Planning Council.

The council acts as a forum for exchanging information and ideas on growth management and promotes municipal collaboration and cost sharing. Its first major project — the Vision 2020 Initiative — faces its first public scrutiny tonight at 7 in the Memorial Union ballroom at the University of Rhode Island.

An eight-page document, Vision 2020 is the result of more than a year of interviews with local business owners, residents, community leaders, faith-based organizations, environmental groups and municipal officials.

The document highlights the five growth issues in South County residents think are most important to attend to in the next two decades: land use, economic growth, water use, transportation and housing.

The idea is that these topics transcend political boundaries, and decisions made in one town can affect neighboring towns, too.

"This document is a means to initiate discussion and involve organizations and individuals at the local, state and regional level in the creation and implementation of the vision," Vision 2020 says.

"WE DON'T WANT to be another Warwick, another Bald Hill Road."

It's a phrase commonly heard at Planning Commission and Town Council meetings throughout Washington County. Growth management seems to be on the tip of every South County tongue these days, and with good reason.

While the Census Bureau reports that the state's population is decreasing, the number of people in Charlestown,
South Kingstown, North Kingstown, Narragansett, Middletown, Smithfield, Burrillville and Coventry is rapidly expanding.

Growth pressures are strongest in Washington County, where the Office of Statewide Planning predicts a 25 percent population increase by 2020. Narragansett and Richmond will lead the way, with the projected number of residents increasing by 46 percent in each community.

In response to these dramatic projections, each of the nine towns on the regional planning council currently has, or is working on, some sort of growth management plan.

The technicalities of each plan take many forms, from building permit caps to impact fees, but the intent of every proposal is theoretically the same — preventing rapid growth from overwhelming existing infrastructures.

Growth management is a matter of preserving the beaches, the trees, the farms and the fields, locals say. Far and wide, residents fear that commercial and residential development will destroy the “rural” character they say currently defines the region.

But it’s not that simple — there’s the law of supply and demand.

People want to move to Washington County for its miles of beaches, its solid public schools, its relatively low tax rates, and its proximity to both Providence and several Connecticut cities.

Because of that, builders can make a comfortable living here constructing houses on vacant residential lots.

South County, executive director of Grow Smart Rhode Island. Washington County and Aquidneck Island lead the way in planning initiatives, and are the only two areas in the state with strong, functioning regional planning councils, Wolf says.

“What’s intriguing and exciting about it is that it’s not something mandated by the state. It’s voluntary, locally generated attempts to be proactive while there’s still some time, rather than just doing damage control later,” Wolf says.

Vision 2020 does not focus entirely on preserving natural resources and curbing construction. It also examines how to encourage home businesses and low-impact manufacturing, where to focus residential growth and why economic diversity is important.

“This is by no means a no-growth group. We want to grow, but we want to grow smart,” Rauh says.

Though the growth plan makes its debut tonight, it is by no means complete, says Alan Desbonnet, a Vision 2020 organizer from the Sea Grant Program.

The council plans to solicit ideas and opinions from both summer and year-round residents throughout June, July and August. After that, the council expects to draw up “action plans” that can be implemented in each town in order to work toward the Vision 2020 goals.

“This meeting is not really the end; it’s kind of one step along the process in getting the final project done,” Rauh says.

SEA CHANGE AHEAD? A couple enjoys the view from a bench overlooking what has become a busy Salt Pond in Wakefield.

Here at The Providence Journal, we’ll devote time to each of the focus areas every Wednesday in June in an attempt to draw attention to the plan and its concerns. In July, the Journal will include a copy of the Vision 2020 report in the South County edition.

The intent is not to unabashedly endorse Vision 2020, but rather to make readers aware of the issues shaping the future of our towns and villages. And to offer information to help answer that question:

What do we want to be when we grow up?
The great balancing act

VARIED USES: Recreation, as well as housing, takes its toll on the once open spaces in South County. Above, golfers take to the green at Boulder Hill Country Club in Richmond.

Populace grows, available land shrinks

Of course Washington County, which offers both rustic charm and sandy shores at a bargain, is growing.

With the area’s relatively low tax rates, its easy access to major cities and its small-town atmosphere, it’s easy to see why local fields and farms seem to be sprouting houses at a staggering rate. In fact, this region consistently issues more building permits than any other statewide.

And the boom doesn’t promise to let up any time soon. The Office of Statewide Planning predicts a 25 percent population increase in Washington County by the year 2020. People want to live here, but will they ruin all the features that make the region unique?

According to a document released by the Washington County Regional Planning Council, called Vision 2020, the population jump is already overwhelming the ability of local towns to manage growth.

Town services — such as schools, police, roads, public water and sewers — cannot keep up with the residential growth, and the new houses aren’t paying their own way.

In relatively rural Richmond, for example, Town Council President Henry Oppenheimer estimated his town spends about $1.10 in services for every $1 in taxes collected on a house.

The local school systems feel the most strain, according to town officials. Already expensive educational services are straining to keep up with a burgeoning student population.

“It costs more in community services to support a house than that house pays in taxes. Protecting open space helps the town economy as well as quality-of-life issues,” said Joanne Riccitelli, director of land protection with the South Kingstown Land Trust.

At the current growth rate, town officials expect that every buildable lot in the county will be developed by 2020, making suburban sprawl the new landscape of South County.

With that in mind, open space preservation has become a priority throughout the area. Nonprofit groups, such as The Nature Conservancy, work to form partnerships with the town, state and federal governments to buy and preserve open land.

South Kingstown stands as perhaps the most successful example of innovative preservation statewide, according to Doug Parker, executive director of The Nature Conservancy.

In 1998, the town formed the Community Partnership, a group comprising representatives of state, local and federal governments and preservation groups, including town officials, the state Department of Environmental Management and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

The partnership meets monthly to
discuss and set priorities on protection projects and coordinate preservation efforts, and the group has seen measurable success. Since its inception, nearly 1,200 acres of open space in South Kingstown have been protected at the cost of $4.77 million.

"Open space is a very good financial investment in the long run. It's good for aesthetics, it's good for the environment, and it saves the town money it would normally have to spend providing services," South Kingstown Town Planner Anthony Lachowicz said.

“It’s a good, clean, quiet industry, and it’s really a win-win situation for the town,” Oppenheimer said.

But open space protection is only one road to retaining village greens and stone walls. Zoning, planning and growth-management ordinances also play a part in the preservation game.

Each of the nine towns on the regional planning council currently has, or is working on, some sort of growth-management plan.

The technicalities of each plan take many forms, from annual caps on the number of annual permits at 160 and charges impact fees for both schools and open space preservation. The town also requires phasing for large developments, which ensures that only a few houses are built at a time. It even has a “special management district” in the zoning ordinance that encourages mixed uses.

Has the plan worked?

“I believe it has. Especially in this economy where more houses are being built now than ever before. For us, the [growth] spike stayed flat,” Lachowicz said.

Growth-management plans don’t come without controversy, however.

The new ordinances often face legal challenges from developers and landowners who want to build on open, residentially zoned property that they’ve often been paying taxes on for several decades.

It’s not always a matter of greediness, said Roger Warren, executive director of the Rhode Island Builders Association. It’s often a simple matter of fairness.

“We totally agree that communities should be planning for growth. But if you look at ‘growth management’ as a code word for shutting off growth completely, then we’re against it,” Warren said.

He said that towns must consider the reasons for growth and respond accordingly. One way to do that is to create short-term growth-management plans that can be adjusted as building needs change.

“This is a short-term fight; over the long term, I think towns will see a consistent growth pattern. Rezoning is a fairly permanent approach to a temporary problem, but caps and impact fees can be changed as times change,” he said.

On that count, Lachowicz agreed.

“A growth-management program needs constant attention; you can’t just adopt a couple of ordinances and hope for the best,” he said.

Everyone with a stake in South County’s future seems to agree on one thing: the time for action is now.

“If we don’t do it now, we’re never going to have the chance at all. It’s kind of a limited time offer. There are all sorts of ways to protect the area. So consider it,” Riccitelli said.

RURAL, BUT FOR HOW LONG: The farm stand on Route 138 in Richmond is a common sight in South County, but development threatens the wide open spaces of the past.

Other towns seems to be balancing growth and preservation in a different way.

Oppenheimer cited golf courses as a successful means of preserving open space while promoting economic development in Richmond.

The town’s five courses attract employment, pay licensing fees, and draw people to the area who may stop off at a local grocery store or restaurant on their way to or from one of the courses.

But more important to the highly residential town, three of the operating courses paid a combined $106,643 in taxes last year, based on 80 percent of their total assessed value of $4.51 million. And the courses kept high-impact houses from being built on open land.

For example, a pharmacy could be built next door to an assisted-living complex, cutting down on the need for additional roads and traffic control, and encouraging the compact village centers of yesteryear.

In terms of comprehensive growth management, South Kingstown again leads the state.

Its 1996 ordinance caps the number of annual permits at 160 and charges impact fees for both schools and open space preservation. The town also requires phasing for large developments, which ensures that only a few houses are built at a time. It even has a "special management district" in the zoning ordinance that encourages mixed uses.

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Precious commodity

There’s water pressure, then there’s pressure on water.

When members of the Washington County Regional Planning Council began asking residents what local resource they were most concerned with protecting, the response was overwhelming: water.

As Washington County residents, we enjoy large quantities of safe, clean ground and surface water—a luxury we may sometimes take for granted.

“We use water, and there are times we abuse it,” said Dale Grogan, a town council member in North Kingstown and a member of the Washington County Regional Planning Council. “The question is, how do we protect it?”

There are five major watersheds that intersect Washington County, and one on Block Island. The state designates all of them as sole-source aquifers, meaning they are the only source of drinking water for the population of the region. If they are contaminated or overused, the county’s current population—about 116,000 residents—according to state figures—have no alternative water supply.

The largest local watershed is the Pawcatuck, a 308-square-mile area located in southwest Rhode Island and southeastern Connecticut. It includes all or part of 10 Rhode Island and four Connecticut towns, including Exeter, Hopkinton, Richmond, Charlestown, North Kingstown, South Kingstown and Westerly.

In that watershed alone, there are 63 bodies of fresh water and 60 streams that drain into the Pawcatuck River and Little Narragansett Bay.

Ground and surface water traverse municipal boundaries, and the local watersheds are noted for having some of the highest quality ground water and surface water in the area. Although there are few, if any, regional safeguards or management structures, our water resources are clearly interconnected.

But the more people move into the region, the higher the odds for accidental contamination or contamination by runoff from lawns or roads. We cannot take our water resources for granted.

“It can be expected, given current development trends, patterns and rates, that more waterways will gain ‘threatened’ status,” said Alan Desbonnet, a Vision 2020 organizer from the Rhode Island Sea Grant Program at URI.

WILL IT BE THERE WHEN YOU NEED IT? As the population increases, so does the demand for water. Above, Doreen Harris and her son Jacob, 1, water a small red maple on their front lawn on Pine Hill Road, in Richmond.
Underground drinking water

Drinking-water sources overlap the boundaries of two states, 14 towns and the Narragansett Indian tribal lands. Throughout the county, ground water provides the only source for drinking water. There are no surface-water reservoirs from which residents and businesses could draw water for drinking, irrigation or other purposes if pollutants contaminate aquifers.

In addition, ground water resources rely entirely on the amount of rainfall the region gets annually.

“Ground water is a critical resource for the livelihood and well being of residents and businesses throughout Washington County,” Desbonnet said.

Irrigation and residential use account for two of the largest drains on underground water sources, according to Desbonnet, and growing populations stress the already taxed — and limited — resources.

Sometimes bans come into play when a town’s water processing plant cannot handle the demand. Temporarily decreasing the amount of water the plants pump helps avert serious breakdowns and prolongs the life of the machinery.

At other times, though, water districts restrict use when levels in feeder streams fall below normal levels. The result is less water for flora, fauna and fish, as well as canoeing, fishing and other recreational activities.

The gauge for the Kingston Water District is the Chipuxet River, said Henry Meyer, the district manager. In the summer, water use increases more than 50 percent for the district, even though the number of residents declines about 50 percent after school ends at the University of Rhode Island.

Unrestricted daily demands on the district can reach 750,000 gallons or more in the summer months, Meyer said. The average daily use is about 450,000 to 500,000 gallons a day over the course of a year, he said.

Drinking water accounts for less than 1 percent of the 734 gallons of water each person in the district uses, on average, in a year, Meyer said. The rest goes to lawn watering, pool filling and other such uses.

“Believe it or not, people actually wash their driveways now, too. Because we have ready access to resources, we take them for granted,” Meyer said.

In response, the Kingston Water District instituted a summer-long daytime water ban in the drought year of 1999 to ease the drain on the Chipuxet. According to Meyer, 90 percent of water used on lawns and gardens during the day evaporates without aiding thirsty plants.

This year’s frequent rainfall makes restrictions unnecessary so far, Meyer said, but that doesn’t mean users won’t ever face a ban again — especially as the number of users continues to grow.

“Last year was not an anomaly; there have been droughts before. The problem with summer is that it is the time when the least water discharges in the basin, and the time when plants need the most water and humans use the most water. It leaves little left over,” he said.

Ponds, rivers and streams

Coastal shorelines, ponds, rivers and streams stand as unique natural resources that draw people to South County. Not only do they support the region’s tourist trade, they also bolster the state’s fishing industry.

Without proper management, development threatens not only public access to these local treasures but also critical aquatic habitats and water quality.

Everyone agrees that a main culprit in the pollution of surface water seems to be failing or substandard septic systems.

Charlestown, Narragansett and North Kingstown already have mandatory inspection programs. South Kingstown is drawing up a similar plan, David Monk, executive director of the Salt Ponds Coalition, said.

Westerly is the only coastal town without some type of wastewater-management system in the works — that’s excluding Shelter Harbor, which created its own inspection requirements.

And the programs seem to be working.

Take, for instance, the east end of Ninigret Pond, which has been closed to shellfishing since the mid-’90s. Monk said that testing by his coalition has been showing very low bacteria counts there on days when the weather is good, and there is very little runoff from yards, roads and fields.
Without effective wastewater management, contaminated areas can be closed to fishing and swimming. More importantly, perhaps, they can be closed to shellfishing—a major commercial and recreational activity in South County.

Recreational shellfishing pumps almost $100 million a year into tourism. Local commercial shellfishing means $5 million to $10 million annually for the state’s industry.

“You can easily see where residential areas correlate with the closed shellfish areas,” Monk said.

In addition, Monk said, bacteria from surface water and nitrates from road runoff can leach into wells, effectively contaminating entire systems. That’s one reason some homeowners believe living on contaminated water could decrease their property values, Monk said.

And the more South County grows, the more septic systems it will have. Despite tougher state regulations for new systems, it’s a simple matter of odds, Monk said.

“The suburban growth has as big an impact on water quality as anything. Any new septic system introduces a new chance to fail,” Monk said.

All of the towns of Washington County have some form of groundwater protection area, or other ordinances or regulations that limit land use in the area of well heads and critical water supplies.

Most towns also have some sort of sediment- and erosion-control ordinance that protects surface waters from excessive runoff and pollutants. But few of those ordinances, if any, are coordinated over town lines to protect entire water systems. Current laws may not be enough to ensure healthy waters in the future.

It’s all a game of managing odds.

“More development, more asphalt and impervious surface area, more people using the water, and more contaminants on the landscape available to move into waterways will increase the risk of water-quality degradation, in both surface and ground water,” Desbonnet said.

Wastewater management the key to preserving a clean water supply

Wastewater management may seem like a foul topic to some, but effective septic programs are essential to maintaining the health of local water.

Failing septic systems pump bacteria into groundwater, which, in turn, flows into surface water. Even the few municipal sewer systems in the area can leak, said David Monk, executive director of the Salt Ponds Coalition.

Houses built before 1970 predate state septic-system standards, and may have substandard systems.

In South Kingstown, that could mean about half of the town’s houses, according to a report by the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association. Signs of a failing system include lush grass growth, squishy patches above the leaching field and a foul odor.

But according to Monk, the closer a house is to the water, the harder it can be to spot a failing septic system.

“The ground is so porous that when you have a failed drain field, it can actually leach downward. There may not be any outward sign,” Monk said.

One solution is to have your septic system examined about every three years by a qualified inspector, who will suggest pumping if necessary.

For more information on maintaining septic systems, contact the University of Rhode Island Cooperative Extension Program at (401) 874-5398.
Aim is to grow but avoid eroding assets

It's logical: an economy with a strong, local base can fuel a town's economic growth and lighten the load on taxpayers' pocketbooks by generating wages, profits and taxes.

But as a rule, Washington County's economy rests almost entirely on property taxes. In Exeter, for example, those taxes supply about 95 percent of the town's annual revenue.

That means that, as more houses are built, homeowners bear the entire brunt of the increased cost of town services that growth brings. The result is that tax rates in the county rise an average of 7.5 percent annually, according to figures from the Washington County Regional Planning Council, and that trend doesn't seem likely to change anytime soon.

That said, it's also logical that diversifying each town's tax base is a prime goal of local leaders.

Developing the already strong tourism industry is only part of the game. Towns need to encourage other kinds of lucrative, low-impact industry, as well.

Tourism

Organizers of the Washington County Regional Planning Council say that it's hard to assess the overall impact tourism has on the region—but two things are certain: the industry is big, and it's getting bigger.

In fact, tourism and its related service industries stand as the county's number one revenue generator, excluding property taxes.

In the summer months of 1999, the South County Tourism Council brought in nearly $260,000—a 12 percent boost over 1998.

And that amount represents only about half the money collected from the state's hotel tax in South County towns.

It also doesn't include other tourism-related dollars that filter into towns, such as beach or driving range fees, nor does it count the cash that tourists spend at such privately owned businesses as restaurants and golf courses.

Clearly, tourism means big money in today's Washington County.

It should play a big part in the region's future, as well, according to members of the regional planning council.

Vision 2020 sees a future tourist economy that draws travelers to the area for multiday and off-season visits, rather than the current focus on summer vacations and day trips.

Ask the South County Tourism Council and members will tell you that means marketing in specialized niches that are quintessentially South County, says Ann O'Neill, the council's president.

This year's marketing drives center
around golf getaways and wedding weekends. According to O'Neill, the newest wedding trend is to hold the ceremony away from home, where guests can not only attend the nuptials but also have a weekend getaway.

Selling South County as a wedding spot is wonderful for a variety of businesses in the area, she says.

"We can do it all, from the invitations and Irish linens to the photographers and videographers," O'Neill said.

But to do that, the region needs to provide high-quality accommodations for those who want to stay here.

Already there is a 150-room hotel in the works in Richmond that is intended to capitalize on casino traffic on Route 95. Still, hotel and motel accommodations are limited, especially in the summer months, and — for an area focused on tourism — the region's bed-and-breakfasts are few and far between.

"There is a big potential for expansion of bed-and-breakfast businesses, but this has not been actively promoted," said Alan Desbonnet, a Vision 2020 organizer from the Sea Grant Program at the University of Rhode Island.

Of course, planning to boost local industry by attracting ever-increasing numbers of tourists isn't all wine and roses, Desbonnet notes.

Most of the industry relies on the area's natural assets. Beaches are the obvious attraction, but people also trek to the region for other outdoor activities, such as canoeing, fishing and hiking.

But "future development of tourism will need to consider how to grow this economic sector without degrading the very assets and resources that are the major attraction and draw for the regional tourism economy," Desbonnet said.

That means creating ways to draw visitors away from the coast and into such inland activities as golfing and garden tours. It also means creating alternative types of revenue to bolster the region's tax base without draining its resources.

Industry

It reads almost like a generic personal ad: small, scenic town seeks medium-size, nonservice industry (preferably locally owned) to provide tax dollars and jobs. Polluters and high-traffic businesses need not apply.

But then again, every Washington County town seems interested in courting the same type of business; it's called "light industry," and it can take many forms — from biotechnology to small-machine assembly.

The idea is to bring in tax dollars manufacturing business, a mountain bike factory or a company that specializes in making fishing lures or rods.

"These kinds of development would assist in maintaining the rural roots and rural character of the region while promoting a diverse economic base," she said.

But what about the sprawl growth seems to bring?

THE NEW WAVE: Planners tend to favor integrated developments that combine living space with businesses such as the Pier Marketplace, in Narragansett, rather than strip developments, such as the stretch of Route 138, above, in Wyoming, which are being discouraged.

The regional council suggests creating a business coalition to work on regional growth issues and identify what types of businesses might be suited to the region.

A coalition could also help towns identify "suitable and desirable areas for economic growth, map them regionally and revise zoning accordingly," the Vision 2020 document says.

Some of those functions are already happening on a municipal basis.

South Kingstown, Charlestown and Richmond, for example, have started their own local planning by creating development zones that encourage a mix of residential and commercial uses.

An example at work in South Kingstown is the Village at South County Commons, planned for Route 1.

Though the project has been controversial because of its location, the plan fits the idea of a planned development
zone quite well.

The 27-building project includes a cinema, office spaces, stores, an assisted-living complex for seniors and walking trails to the town's senior center and YMCA.

The idea is to curb traffic and increase convenience by laying out a community of stores that people both need and can walk to.

Mixed use, many say, also discourages the spread of so-called big-box stores—large stand-alone chain stores that sit on the outskirts of established business areas.

In Westerly, the Westerly-Pawcatuck Chamber of Commerce is taking a different tack to encourage growth and discourage sprawl. It's recruiting businesses to fill existing vacant retail spaces, said Lisa Konicki, executive director of the Chamber.

"We're not looking to be a cookie-cutter community, but we already have the plazas; and when you drive by them and four of the seven stores are empty, that's really a concern," she said.

In addition, most towns in the county currently are working on their own versions of economic development commissions that are geared to courting business and industry.

Some of the long-term projects for those groups may eventually include creating incentives, such as tax breaks, to lure desirable businesses into town.

But the bad news is that the commissions seem to be finding it hard to get started, especially in the more rural towns.

One problem could be that rural towns have inadequate infrastructure—such as town water—to support non-retail businesses. As a result, developers go elsewhere without making serious inquiries into the area.

State interference poses a problem, too, Hopkinton's Schaffer says.

"Interested businesses go to the state first, and the towns are always the last to know. The state directs them somewhere else, and it leaves us very frustrated," she said.

That's one area where regional planning could help, Charlestown Town Council President Charles Beck says.

The theory is that towns working together could attract businesses directly to the region, without using the state as a middleman, and point them to the local town that best fits their needs.

"If development doesn't work for my town, I can pass it on to another where it will work better," Beck said.

Despite the fact that some municipally based projects are under way, the Vision 2020 document cautions against planning strictly on a town-by-town basis.

When each town goes its own way, "the end result could very easily be a hodgepodge of sprawl linked by unappealing, overcongested highways," Desbonnet said.

Michael Rauh, Jr., the planning council facilitator and senior vice president/retail banking at The Washington Trust Company, puts it simply:

"There's real power in working together on these issues."
Roads well traveled

Striving for the right mix of housing and transportation

Development in Washington County seems to have ushered in a dramatic change in local lifestyles.

Towns have turned from bustling mill villages and farms into bedroom communities. Residents wake up here each morning and drive to work in Newport, Providence or Connecticut.

With only a few major roads servicing the region, traffic congestion has become an increasingly common problem. Tourists and college students aren’t the only culprits, the population boom that goes along with South County growth plays a large part, as well.

“Many people who have moved to Washington County have made a clear tradeoff in doing so—they are trading a long commute for a high quality of residential life,” says Alan Desbonnet, a Vision 2020 organizer from the Rhode Island Sea Grant Program at URI.

And as white-collar commuters move into the region during these healthy economic times, median home prices climb higher and higher.

Most recent figures show the median price of a single-family house in Washington County sits at $144,490. That’s if Block Island, whose $406,000 median price skews the figure drastically, is left out of the equation.

As Washington County loses its blue collar character, its blue collar population seems to be losing its place in Washington County, as well.

People who grew up here are not only complaining about the congested roads—some are wondering how they can afford to continue to live in their hometowns.

Transportation

During peak commuting hours, as many as 67,000 vehicles travel on Washington County roads, according to figures provided by the Washington County Regional Planning Council.

About 55,000 people commute daily, and of those, nearly 44,000—about 80 percent—drive alone in their vehicles.

Beach traffic is a common annoyance for those making their way down Route 1 or Route 78 in the summer months. And driving through Kingston when the University of Rhode Island’s in session? Fugeddaboutit.

According to the planning council, it makes sense to promote and develop alternative transportation options regionally. A good example would be the South County bike path, which one day will link the Kingston train station and downtown Narragansett.

Another piece to the transportation puzzle lies with the mixed-use village concept, the council says. Building stores, offices and houses within walking distance of each other makes it easier for people to get around without cars and eases stress on clogged roadways.

Relatively dense villages would make providing public transportation

ALTERNATIVE TRAVEL: A taxi awaits incoming commuters at the Kingston train station. About 55,000 people commute daily and nearly 44,000 of them drive alone.
easier, too, says Anna Prager, vice president of South Kingstown Town Council and chairman of the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority.

Currently, development in Washington County is too dispersed to make fixed bus routes effective, Prager says.

"They simply don’t work here. We’ve had routes down here, and the buses ran around empty," she says.

With that in mind, RIPTA plans to start a flexible route this fall whereby riders can call and request bus service on a daily basis, as needed. It also plans to start a fixed bus route between Westerly and Wakefield, and increase its popular park-and-ride program.

URI could help, too, Prager says, by making its on-campus parking rules stricter in order to encourage bus use.

"The population density is certainly there, but the policies on campus don’t promote mass transit. Everyone can bring cars on campus and park for free; there’s no incentive," Prager says.

But easing the local traffic squeeze doesn’t mean merely looking to alternative transportation, the planning council notes.

Sections of the county road system are already over capacity, since many local roadways were originally designed and developed for limited traffic flow. The roads that the area does have clearly need help.

For example, a recent study by BETA Engineering shows that nearly 45 percent of the roads in South Kingstown "are at or beyond the critical point" where pavement deteriorates. Another 12 percent of the town’s roads need to be completely replaced, the BETA report says.

By approaching the state Department of Transportation as an organized bloc, Washington County towns have a better shot at getting some of their highway projects pushed through, the planning council says. It seems to make sense logistically — obviously Route 138 does not run through South Kingstown alone.

"The chances are better if we all stand together on this," says Michael Rauh, Jr., the planning council facilitator and senior vice president/retail banking at The Washington Trust Company.

Housing

For local landlords, the system works wonderfully just the way it is: URI students rent from September to May, and high-paying summer renters come in during the tourist season.

But for the middle-income renters who live here full-time, the situation borders on abysmal. In fact, according to the most recent census data, there

ALTERNATIVE ROUTE: Bikers, skaters and strollers on the South County bike path take advantage of a break in traffic to cross South Road, in South Kingstown. Planners hope the bike path, which will one day link the Kingston train station to downtown Narragansett, will provide an alternate transportation option.
are only about 12,000 renter-occupied units in the entire county.

Although houses are being built in Washington County at a rapid rate, most of the subdivisions sprouting up consist of expensive single-family houses, which not only push out low- and middle-income earners, but also put the highest stress on town services.

The local populations continue to swell.

The increased demand for housing has driven the cost of buying a house out of the reach of first-time homebuyers, the elderly and average income earners. Since the demand for affordable housing far outpaces the availability, older people, blue-collar workers and young people are being pushed out of the area.

As Chris Barnett, spokesman for the Rhode Island Housing and Mortgage Finance Corporation.

"People who grew up in these towns are saying, 'Where am I going to live?' And towns are wondering how to keep their children here and provide for their seniors," he says.

Each town in the county has made affordable housing a priority in its Comprehensive Plan, and under this state formula each community is required to allocate 10 percent of its housing stock to low- and moderate-income families.

Using the state's definition of affordable — that is, publicly subsidized — not a single local community has met that goal.

In fact, Washington County towns have some of the lowest affordable housing percentages in the state. Nearly 3,200 more subsidized units would have to be built in the county to meet the minimum goal.

That doesn't even account for housing that's affordable, but not Section 8.

Most towns and organizations recognize housing as affordable if the person who lives in it pays less than 30 percent of his or her monthly income to do so. That, too, is hard to find.

Some towns are trying to fix the problem with zoning, but ironically, the same zoning changes that preserve open space could be driving up the cost of housing, as well. As minimum lot sizes increase, so does the cost of building a house, Barnett notes.

One solution may be providing breaks on permits and fees for developers who build houses or apartment complexes that meet certain criteria.

In Charlestown, for instance, housing that qualifies as low- and moderate-income or for the elderly is exempt from the impact fees that are tacked onto building permits. Those developments are also exempt from the town's permit cap.

The planning council notes that the mixed-use-village concept could also play a part in encouraging affordable housing.

Plots that are easily accessible to local businesses and services attract the interest of developers and residents alike.

"Village development also makes lower-cost housing units feasible to maintain and construct. Village centers that have shops, infrastructure and a mix of housing opportunities ... make for affordable, livable communities," Desbonnet says.

As South County Community Action's John Glasheen puts it, the question is yet again a matter of balance in this growing region.

"It's a question of what we want our population to look like. What degree of diversity do we want? How do we want our people to live?"
For more information on the Washington County Regional Planning initiative, call Virginia Lee or Meg Kerr at URI Coastal Resource Center/Rhode Island Sea Grant Program at (401) 874-6224 or visit our web site at http://seagrant.gso.uri.edu/scc.