

Eastern Connecticut Resource Conservation & Development Area, Inc.

Planning Needs Survey Report

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Executive Summary

Across Connecticut, development is occurring at record rates. Continued growth, development and redevelopment are inevitable but how we grow is not. Land use planning for current and future growth helps towns and cities develop a long-term vision for their communities and lays out the framework for achieving that vision. However, the resources and commitment to planning varies substantially from town to town and city to city.

The Eastern Connecticut Resource Conservation & Development Council (RC&D) recently undertook a survey to evaluate the planning capacity of cities and towns in its area, and to identify opportunities to provide assistance. This survey consisted of questions about the number of staff devoted to planning and zoning activities, the organization of land use boards and commissions, planning resources available and used, and the status of certain plans.

Not surprisingly, the survey revealed disparities in staffing levels, especially between small towns and more urbanized towns and cities. While the RC&D does not have a general recommendation as to what constitutes “adequate” staffing levels, it is generally accepted that land use boards and commissions with more professional assistance are better able to review development applications and take a more proactive approach to planning, rather than the typical reactive approach so many communities are forced to deal with.

Survey results also highlighted the prevalence of towns and cities with joint Planning and Zoning Commissions. Joint boards and commissions may devote more time and attention to regulatory issues such as planning and zoning applications, than long-range plan development and/or implementation.

In the absence of local planning staff, municipalities may choose to consult with Council of Government, Regional Planning Agency and/or Conservation District staff to aid in project review and decision-making processes. Survey results generally show that these additional resources are underutilized. When towns and cities with limited staffs do not take advantage of these resources, they may have fewer opportunities for scrutiny and consideration of the long-term implications of their planning decisions.

Conversations with survey participants regarding the findings prompted the recommendations in this report, namely that the RC&D Council should work with a variety of stakeholders to elevate the status and recognition of planning, to better coordinate planning education and training for local decision-makers, and to develop leadership skills among local planning officials.

Introduction

In late 2004, the Eastern Connecticut Resource Conservation & Development Council (RC&D) undertook a survey to evaluate the planning capacity of cities and towns in its area, and to identify opportunities to provide assistance. The survey consisted of questions about the number of staff devoted to planning and zoning activities, the organization of land use boards and commissions, planning resources available and used, and the status of certain plans. The results of the survey have implications beyond the Eastern CT RC&D's Area Plan and activities, as the municipal planning needs highlighted, are probably not unique to Eastern Connecticut. Thus, the RC&D Council chose to publish this survey report and distribute it widely among state, regional and local officials to raise awareness and contribute to an ongoing dialogue on planning in Connecticut.

Methodology

The RC&D initially asked planning staffs at the Councils of Government (COG) and Regional Planning Agencies (RPA) to provide survey information on each municipality within their respective regions. Eastern Connecticut has six such regional organizations: Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (NECCOG), Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments (SCCOG), Windham Region Council of Governments (WINCOG), Midstate Regional Planning Agency (Midstate), Connecticut River Estuary Regional Planning Agency (CRERPA), and Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG).

After the initial surveys, the RC&D consulted the State Register and Manual, municipal websites, and other resources to verify information concerning municipal commissions and planning staff. When additional information was needed, towns and cities were contacted directly. Some towns may have hired additional staff or completed planning projects underway at the time when the survey was first conducted; however, the RC&D attempted to verify data to the extent possible in late 2005.

Survey Results

Staffing Shortages

The survey showed a limited amount of town planning staff in many Eastern Connecticut communities. Only 69% of all municipalities surveyed employed a full-time town planner and only 31% employed an assistant planner in any capacity. Not surprisingly, the more populated and urbanized Capitol Region has higher municipal staffing levels than other regions. See Figure 1-A. While the RC&D does not have a general recommendation as to what constitutes “adequate” staffing levels, land use boards and commissions with some professional assistance are better able to review development applications in the increasingly complex regulatory environment in which they operate. Resource protection, land preservation and balanced growth depend upon proactive planning, instead of reactive development permitting. Professional planning staff can be of great assistance to land use boards and commissions in taking a more proactive approach to planning.

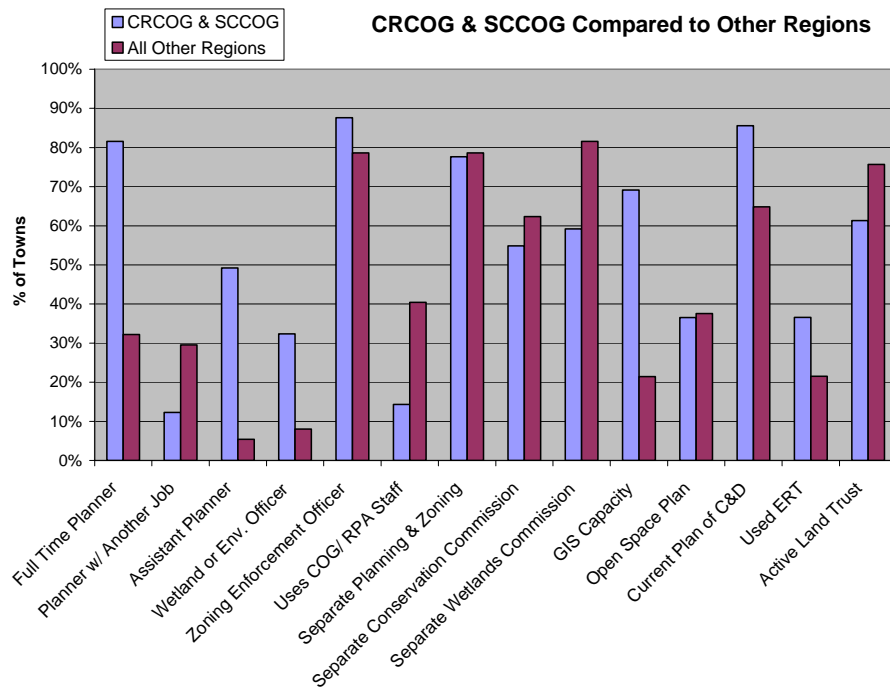


Figure 1-A

Municipalities may use COG or RPA and Conservation District staff to compensate for small, or supplement, in-house professional planning staffs. Only about 20% of the municipalities within the survey area use regional planning agency staff to assist in land use planning or enforcement issues. When neither local nor regional planning staff makes up for a lack of local staff, planning decisions have fewer opportunities for scrutiny and consideration of their long-term implications.

Finally, over a quarter of municipalities outside the Capitol Region employ a planner who maintains another job. Usually these individuals act as Wetlands or Zoning Enforcement Officers for the same town, but some serve as Town Planner for more than one

municipality. These additional obligations can hinder a planner’s ability to devote adequate time and attention to the review and analysis of development proposals.

Autonomy in Town Boards and Commissions

Less than 70% of all municipalities surveyed maintained a separate and independent Inland Wetlands Commission. See Figure 1-B. While municipalities are not required to have Conservation Commissions, such commissions perform important roles in natural resource protection. Less than 60% had a separate Conservation Commission. Most Inland Wetland Commissions that are not independent commissions in Eastern Connecticut are combined with Conservation Commissions. The existence of separate Conservation, Inland Wetlands, and Open Space Commissions provide multiple avenues for ensuring sustainable development. These independent commissions can also alleviate some of the burden on Planning and Zoning Commissions, allowing them to focus on planning and/or zoning issues. Alternatively, independent commission can serve as checks and balances on Planning & Zoning Commissions. On the other hand, independent commissions can sometimes result in schisms within a community with each commission jealously guarding its authority.

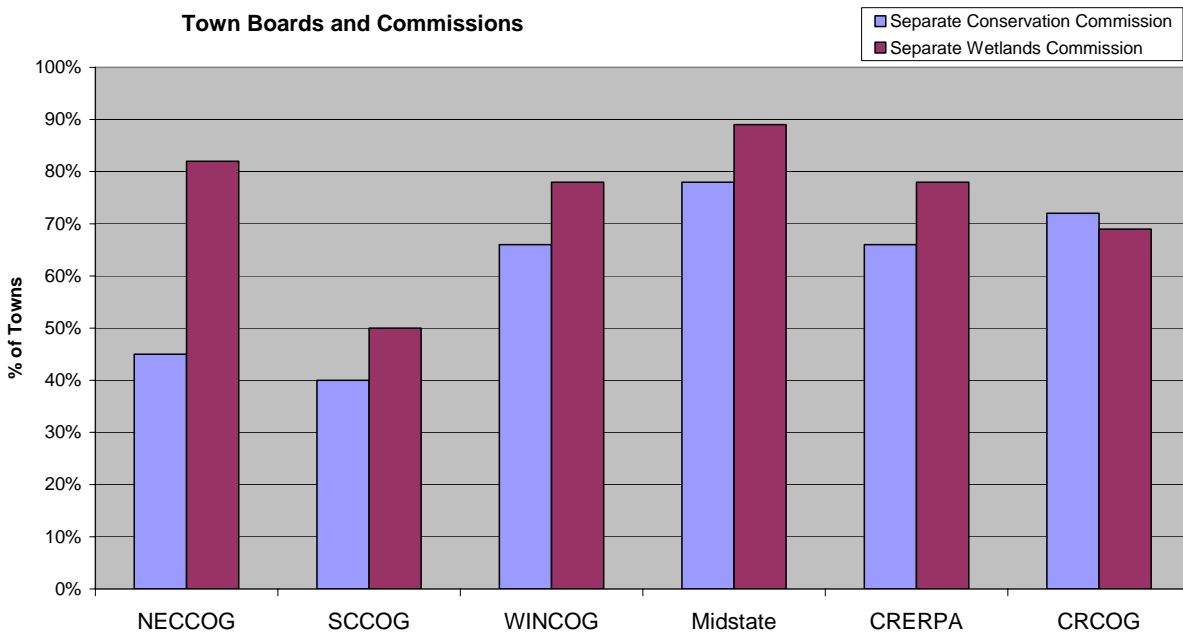


Figure 1-B

While combining both the planning and zoning roles of municipal government into one board can facilitate consistency among towns’ visions and goals for development and actual development, this is not necessarily the result. Instead, joint boards frequently devote most of their time and attention to planning and zoning application decisions, to the neglect of long-range plan development and/or implementation. In Eastern Connecticut, only 17% of towns maintained separate and independent Planning and Zoning Commissions. See Figure 1-C. The advantages and disadvantages of joint commissions vary from town to town. Nevertheless, the structure of land use commissions can facilitate or hinder the decision-making process.

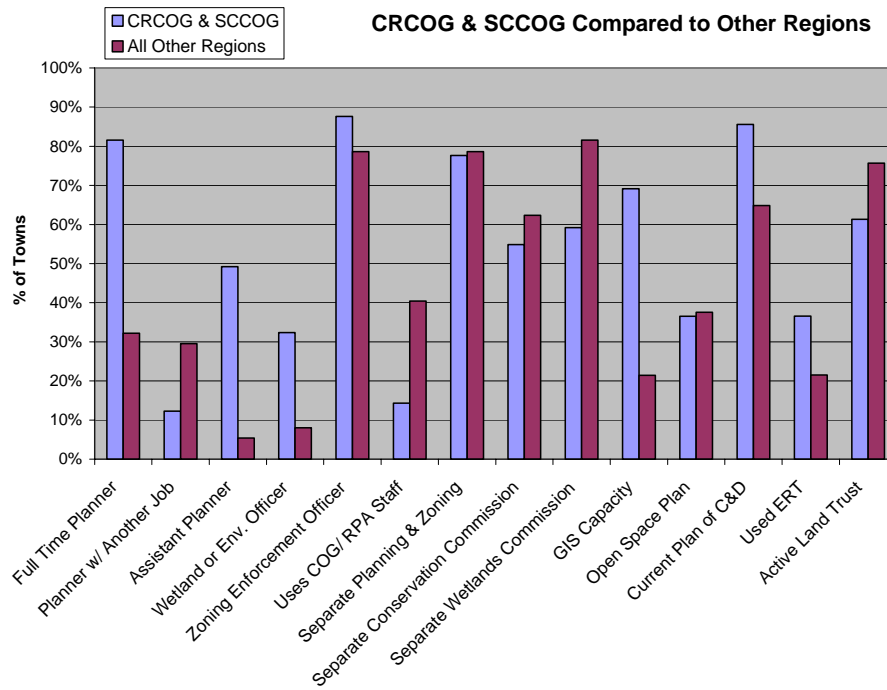


Figure 1-C

Available Resources Neglected

Several other planning resources are available to communities, including soil conservation districts, regional organizations like the Green Valley Institute, the Environmental Review Team (ERT), local land trusts and more. The ERT is a valuable tool provided by the RC&D for municipalities to analyze development proposals and other land management issues, yet only 26% of towns surveyed have used this resource in the past ten years. This low usage results in part from the fact that an ERT review is best done prior to formal application due to time constraints.

Active land trusts can also be valuable tools for municipalities. They frequently offer financial assistance to municipalities in acquiring open space. Also, they can hold and manage preservation easements and/or land that municipalities obtain through regulatory requirements, in addition to their own independent acquisition and management activities. About 36% of the communities included in this survey do not have an active land trust. See Figure 1-D.

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) are another analytical tool that municipal officials can use to make informed land-use decisions. GIS software can help decipher the environmental, social, and aesthetic impacts of policies and development proposals. Less than half of the surveyed municipalities maintain some GIS capacity. Many of the towns that have GIS software may not have sufficiently trained users of the technology to effectively benefit from it. However, some rely on their COGs or RPAs for GIS services. A regional approach to providing GIS services offers opportunities for efficiencies and municipal labor and resource savings.

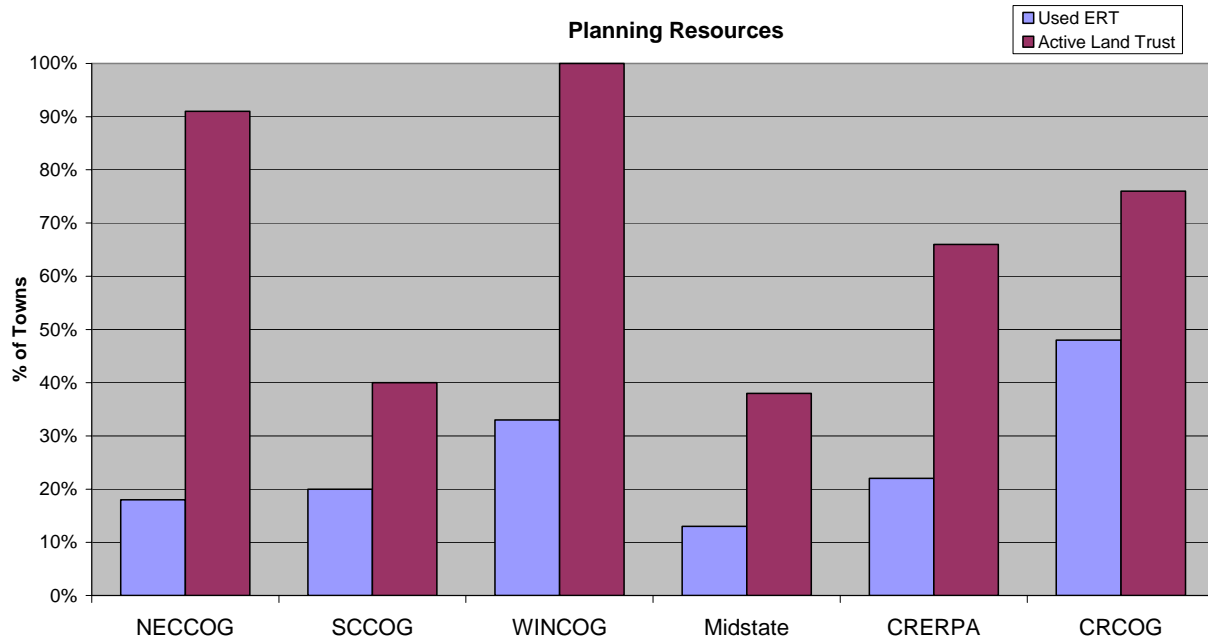


Figure 1-D

Local Plans

State law requires municipalities to develop and revise plans of conservation and development at least every 10 years. These plans establish policy guidelines for land use and future growth. Recent changes to state laws have further added to the elements that each local plan must now address, including open space. Several towns in Eastern Connecticut appear not to be in compliance with this state law. In fact, one town has not updated its plan since 1989. Yet, most towns surveyed did have a relatively current Plan of Conservation and Development. Only about a third of the municipalities included in this survey had an Open Space Plan. Some towns might have already incorporated open space plans into their plans of conservation and development, so this figure may be lower than the actual number of municipal open space plans. See Figure 1-E.

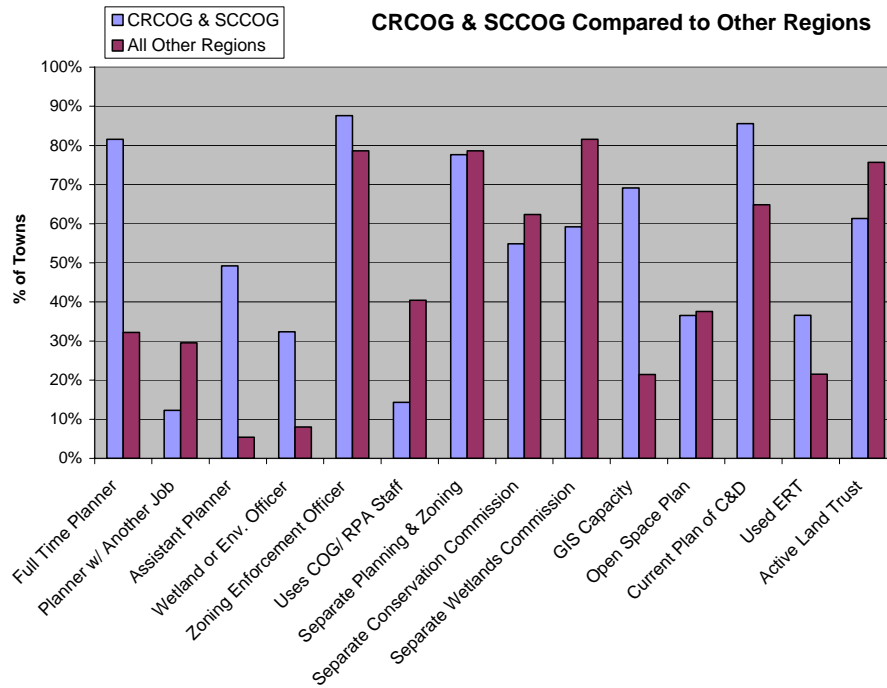


Figure 1-E

Regions

NECCOG and WINCOG Regions

The two regions share similar characteristics – mostly rural, small towns, facing primarily residential development pressures. These towns showed the lowest municipal staff levels in Eastern Connecticut. Only about 35% have a full-time planner and another 45% have a planner with another job, whereas in other regions, over 65% of towns have a full-time planner. See Figure 2-A. At the same time, these two regions rely more heavily on regional planning staff assistance than towns in other regions.

A greater percentage of towns in these areas had current plans of conservation and development than in other regions. The overwhelming majority also had active land trusts, compared to about 60% of towns in other regions.

Towns in these two areas reported limited GIS capacity and slightly less use of the ERT program than in other regions. See Figure 2-A.

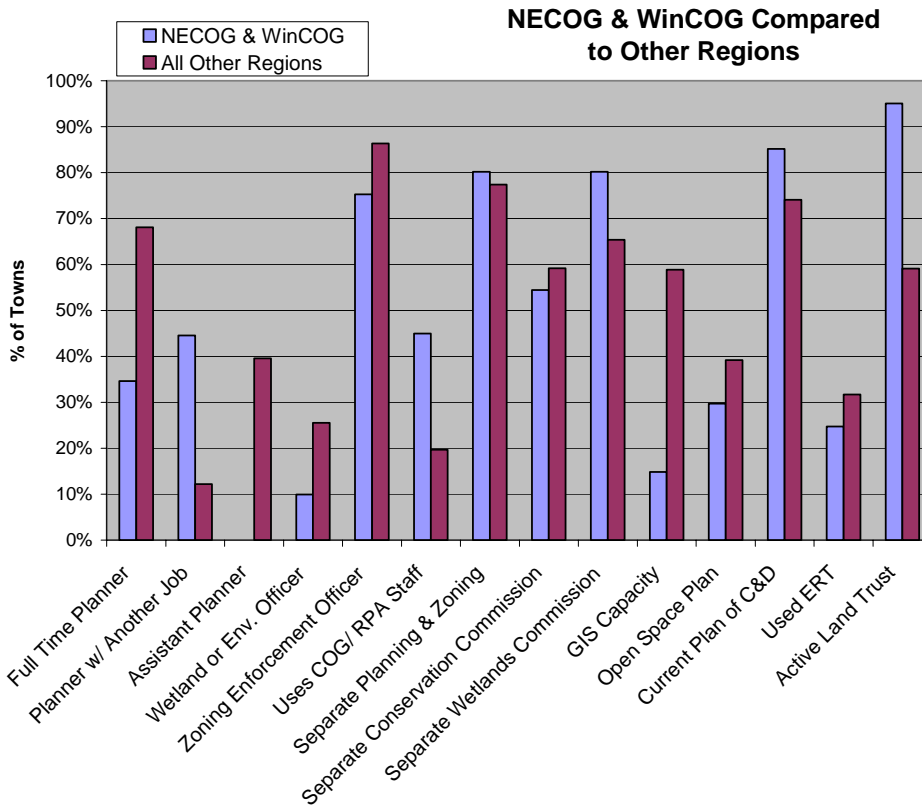


Figure 2-A

Midstate and CRERPA Regions

These two regions collaborate and cooperate on many fronts, and are therefore, frequently grouped together. Because many municipalities in the Midstate and CRERPA regions lack their own planning staff, they rely on COG or RPA personnel for assistance in making land-use decisions. The survey indicates that local planning staff levels are lower in these two regions, while reliance on RPA staff is greater, than in other regions. See [Figure 2-B](#).

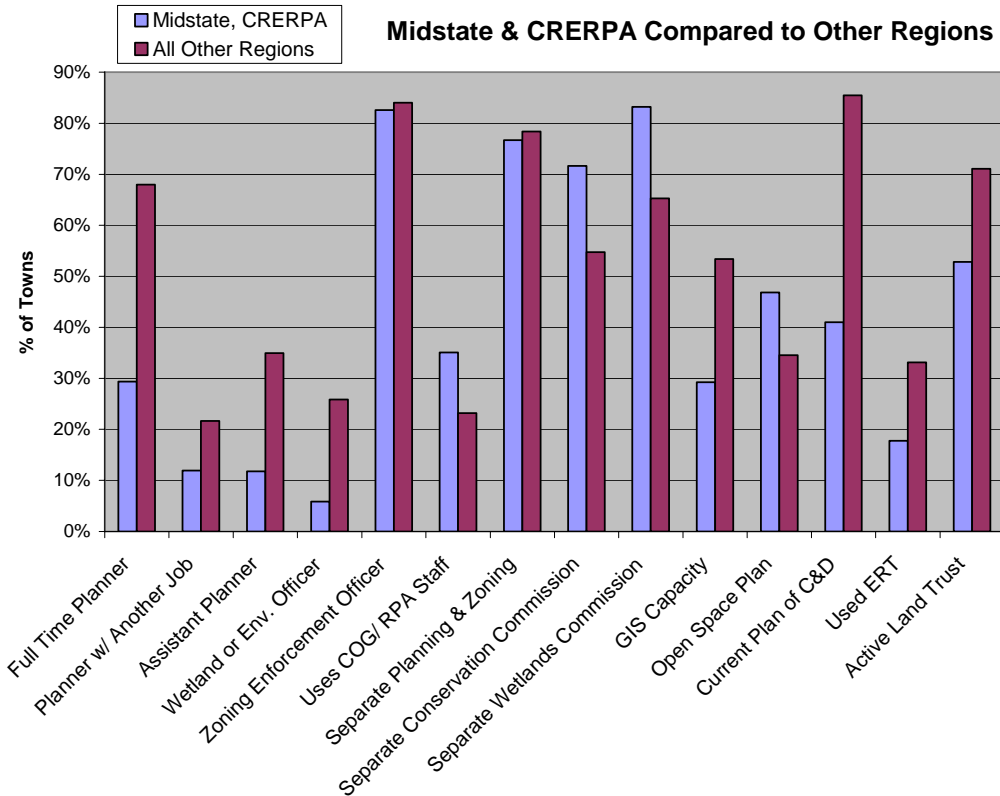


Figure 2-B

Towns in the CRERPA and Midstate regions have taken even less advantage of the ERT than towns the other regions. In addition, the number of active land trusts is relatively low in these regions.

Midstate and CRERPA regions stand out from other regions in Eastern Connecticut for the level of separation between certain land use boards and commissions. These two regions have higher percentages of separate Conservation and Wetlands Commissions than do other regions in the survey. See [Figure 2-B](#).

The lower Connecticut River region also has notably few current local Plans of Conservation and Development. However, they have more Open Space Plans than in other regions. While preservation planning is important, it is equally important to have established policies to guide development and growth.

CRCOG and SCCOG Regions

These two regions share similar characteristics in the diversity of municipalities and populations served. From cities such as Hartford and New London to small towns like Andover and Voluntown, these two regions face similar challenges: redevelopment of urbanized areas and logical and controlled development in rapidly developing rural and suburban areas.

Not surprisingly, given the concentration of population and development, municipalities in these two regions have the highest planning and enforcement staffing levels. See [Figure 2-C](#). Perhaps because of the greater number of municipal staff, there is less reliance on Regional Planning Agency staff in making day-to-day land use decisions in these two regions.

Again, there may be a correlation between having professional, local planning staff and the use of available resources, as these communities show higher use of planning resources, such as GIS and the ERT.

Finally, a larger percentage of these municipalities had current plans of conservation and development than in other regions combined. More local staff and resources might contribute to higher compliance with state law regarding local plans.

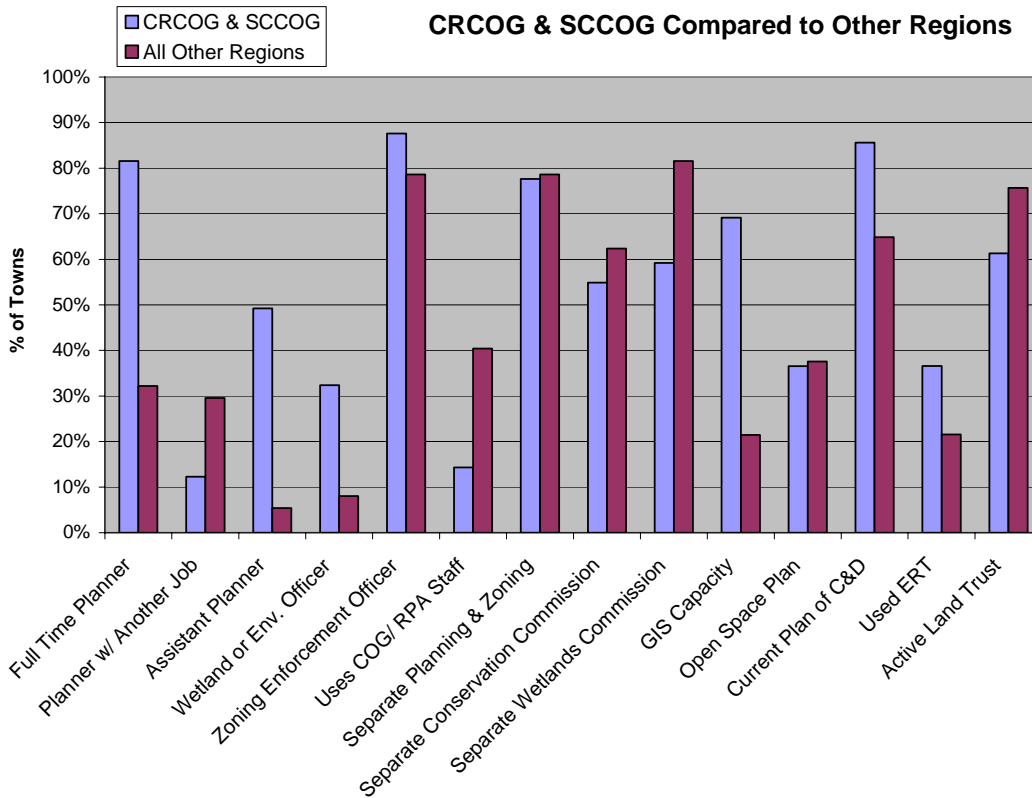


Figure 2-C

Findings

A meeting of Eastern Connecticut RPOs to discuss the survey data further informed the findings of this report. Conversations at this meeting highlighted several themes that formed the basis for the recommendations that follow. Those themes include:

Diversity

Eastern Connecticut contains a wide variety of communities, and in a very small geographic area. These include dense, built-out and redeveloping urban centers, smaller "bedroom" towns, larger, mixed-use suburban towns, and sparsely settled rural farm communities. This diversity is one of the region's most attractive attributes, but also presents a challenge to the planning community, as each town and city seeks to craft a planning approach that best fits its unique needs.

Funding

The increasing demand for dwindling municipal resources has created an environment in which many communities provide the minimum necessary to meet their statutory obligations in regards to planning and managing growth. Increased revenues might not necessarily lead to increased planning capacity, as some communities will prioritize other municipal services such as education, public safety, or infrastructure over planning. The growing crisis in municipal finance threatens all areas of public service.

Policy Coordination

While the legislature has recently begun to increase the level of policy and planning coordination required between levels of government, land use decisions are still predominantly made at the local level. Recent changes, and the potential for further changes in planning law, following adoption of the 2005 State Plan of Conservation and Development will affect how local towns organize, fund and implement planning over time.

Knowledge

Local commissioners and staff need to be aware of advances in best practices, relevant technologies, markets, legislation and other factors affecting land use. However, the diverse natures of communities, a reliance on volunteer commissioners, political turnover and a general lack of funding for planning results in a disparate levels of planning knowledge and understanding across the State. In addition, while a wide variety of organizations involved in some aspect of technical training exist, their efforts are not coordinated or designed in concert with one another in order to offer a convenient, consistent and comprehensive program.

Recommendations

The Eastern Connecticut RC&D Council in conjunction with the State, Regional Planning Organizations, municipalities and other stakeholders, such as the CT Chapter of the American Planning Association, the Office of Policy and Management and UCONN, should pursue the following three basic objectives.

Statewide Recognition of the Value of Planning

Create and sustain an appreciation for the benefits of sound planning and growth management at all levels of government, but especially at the local level, regardless of the type or character of a given community, its financial resources or its apparent level of technical expertise. This would require a program that cultivates grass-roots interest in planning, and serve as a necessary precursor to increasing local planning capacity.

Coordinated Planning Education and Training

Develop a consistent and comprehensive curriculum for local land use officials, as well as a means of updating and delivering such a program on a regular, affordable and convenient basis. The components of a well-rounded program that includes the basic aspects of land use management, such as authority, organizational structures and relationships, constitutional issues, hearings and meetings, plan review, planning resources and other relevant matters largely already exist, though, somewhat in isolation from one another. Reliance on volunteers and political turnovers reinforce the need for a coordinated, comprehensive training program that is consistently offered and attended.

Leadership Skills Development

Develop complementary skills-oriented training programs. Beyond planning knowledge, community leaders need appropriate training in management skills, conflict resolution and communications to help resolve local land use and growth management challenges. The Connecticut Land Use Leadership Alliance (LULA) provides an example of this type of program.

Conclusion

This survey of local planning capacity revealed a myriad of organizational frameworks, funding mechanisms, and knowledge levels. Eastern Connecticut continues to face unique and substantial economic, transportation, housing, infrastructure and environmental challenges. These challenges are often too large, complex and inter-related to be managed effectively under our current planning system. The Eastern Connecticut RC&D Council is a unique and valuable asset, with a proven track record. In cooperation with the State and regional advocates of sound planning, the Council can play an instrumental role in improving planning capacity.

The RC&D looks forward to a continued and expanded dialogue with other stakeholders, as together we seek to sustain a high quality of life in Eastern Connecticut for the benefit of future generations.

The Eastern CT Resource Conservation and Development Program

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Figure 3-A
Town List with 2004 Estimated Populations

NECCOG	Population	Midstate	Population	CRCOG	Population
Brooklyn	7,650	Cromwell	13,520	Andover	3,177
Canterbury	5,010	Durham	7,206	Avon	16,992
Eastford	1,725	East Haddam	8,789	Bolton	5,173
Killingly	17,214	East Hampton	11,927	Bloomfield	20,414
Plainfield	15,353	Haddam	7,535	Canton	9,603
Pomfret	4,086	Middlefield	4,303	East Granby	5,018
Putnam	9,237	Middletown	47,141	East Hartford	49,416
Sterling	3,384	Portland	9,340	East Windsor	10,261
Thompson	9,263		109,761	Ellington	14,141
Union	744	CRERPA		Enfield	45,567
Woodstock	7,854	Chester	3,846	Farmington	24,682
	81,520	Clinton	13,638	Glastonbury	32,852
SCCOG		Deep River	4,736	Granby	10,989
Bozrah	2,446	Essex	6,816	Hartford	125,053
Colchester	15,334	Killingworth	6,381	Hebron	9,085
East Lyme	18,629	Lyme	2,115	Manchester	55,563
Franklin	1,927	Old Lyme	7,535	Marlborough	6,185
Griswold	11,194	Old Saybrook	10,520	Newington	29,646
Groton, City	9,288	Westbrook	6,597	Rocky Hill	18,620
Groton, Town	31,234		62,184	Simsbury	23,460
Ledyard	15,149			Somers	10,888
Lisbon	4,231			South Windsor	25,586
Montville	19,846			Suffield	14,539
New London	26,375			Tolland	14,416
North Stonington	5,201			Vernon	29,338
Norwich	36,721			West Hartford	61,392
Preston	4,846			Wethersfield	26,358
Salem	4,058			Windsor	28,652
Sprague	3,011			<u>Windsor Locks</u>	12,333
Stonington	18,381				739,399
Voluntown	2,632				
Waterford	19,089				
	249,592				
WINCOG					
Ashford	4,349				
Chaplin	2,418				
Columbia	5,295				
Coventry	12,166				
Hampton	1,968				
Lebanon	7,224				
Mansfield	24,232				
Scotland	1,665				
Windham	23,167				
	82,484				

**Figure 3-B
Survey Results**

Area Name	Total Towns in Area	Full Time Planner	Planner w/ Another Job	Assist Planner	Wetland or Env. Officer	ZEO	Uses COG/ RPA Staff	Joint Planning & Zoning	Separate Cons Comm	Separate IWWA	Joint Cons & IWWA	GIS Capacity	Open Space Plan	Current Plan of C&D	Used ERT	Active Land Trust	Help Needed
NECCOG	11	36%	45%	0%	9%	64%	0%	73%	45%	82%	18%	9%	18%	91%	18%	91%	100%
SCCOG	20	65%	20%	35%	30%	90%	35%	80%	30%	45%	55%	65%	30%	85%	20%	40%	15%
WINCOG	9	33%	44%	0%	11%	89%	100%	89%	66%	78%	22%	22%	44%	78%	33%	100%	100%
Midstate	8	50%	13%	25%	0%	63%	25%	100%	78%	89%	13%	25%	50%	50%	13%	38%	25%
CRERPA	9	11%	11%	0%	11%	100%	44%	56%	66%	78%	22%	33%	44%	33%	22%	66%	55%
CRCOG	29	93%	7%	59%	34%	86%	0%	76%	72%	69%	24%	72%	41%	86%	48%	76%	28%
Total	86	48%	23%	20%	16%	82%	34%	79%	60%	74%	26%	38%	38%	71%	26%	69%	54%