

Northwest Regional Planning Commission

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REGIONAL PROFILE

OVERVIEW

The future is founded on the past in order to plan for our future as a region over the next 10 to 20 years, we need to consider where we've been, and take stock of where we are. The following provides a brief description of the Northwest Region, including its broader regional context, its historic development to better define the "regional character" we hope to maintain and a description of prevailing trends and patterns of growth affecting the two-county area.

REGIONAL CONTEXT

Politically, the Northwest Region of Vermont is defined by the 23 municipalities (19 towns, 3 incorporated villages, and the City of St. Albans) which make up Franklin and Grand Isle Counties, located in northwestern Vermont (see list of municipalities to the right and the Base Map on the next page). The Region is bordered by the Province of Quebec to the north, New York State to the west, Chittenden and Lamoille Counties to the south and east, and Orleans County to the east. The City of Burlington, 24 miles south of St. Albans, is the nearest metropolitan area. Plattsburgh, NY is easily reached by ferry from Grand Isle, and the port of Montreal is less than a two hour drive (70 miles) to the north.

Geographically, the Region spans the 45th parallel, and is located wholly within the Lake Champlain drainage basin extending from the height of the northern Green Mountains westward to the shores of Lake Champlain. It includes roughly 7.8% of the state's total land area (720 sq. mi.); however, its total area, which includes much of northern Lake Champlain, is significantly larger (887 sq. mi.).

Franklin County, with a land area of 637 sq. mi. and a 2000 population of around 45,400, is by far the larger of the two counties. The western portion of Franklin County, traversed by I-89, lies within the Champlain Valley and includes the shore land towns of Georgia, St. Albans, Swanton and Highgate. Access inland to the foothills and western flanks of the Green Mountains is provided via Route 105, following the Missisquoi River; Route 36 along the Black Creek drainage, which flows through the heart of the region's hill country; and Routes 104 and 15, following the Lamoille River. Only two roads, Route 105 out of Richford, and Route 242 out of Montgomery, provide year-round access eastward across the Green Mountains.

Grand Isle County, also known as the "Champlain Islands" or simply "the Islands," is made up of three main islands the southern most shared by the towns of South Hero and Grand Isle, two others comprising the Town of North Hero, and Isle La Motte to the west, as well as the Alburgh peninsula which extends southward from the Canadian border. Surrounded by the waters of Lake Champlain (of which around 100 sq. mi. are within the county), the Islands are connected to the mainland and to each other by a series of causeways and bridges, and by a year-round ferry service operating between Grand Isle and Plattsburgh. With a land area of only 83 sq. mi., and a 2000 population of around 6,900, Grand Isle County is not much larger than many Vermont towns. Grand Isle County communities, however, share a unique character and identity that is intimately tied to the lake and island life.

The Northwest Region, with a combined year-round population in 2000 of just over 52,300 and an average density of around 73 people per square mile, remains predominantly rural. Only 28% of the Region's year-round residents live within "urban" areas, including St. Albans City (2000 pop: 7,650) the Region's primary government, commercial and employment center and the three incorporated villages of Alburgh, Enosburg Falls and Swanton. Population density is shown in the map on the next page.

The formidable barrier of the Green Mountains to the east and the somewhat easier access afforded by Lake Champlain to the west prescribed traditional routes of travel, resulting in a strong north-south

orientation with respect to traffic and trade. The Region's location along the U.S. border with Canada, at "the end of the line", and its distance from major urban centers also served historically to isolate it from eastern markets, and from the pressures and impacts that accompanied growth and development elsewhere in New England.

Until recently, this relative isolation helped sustain the Region's traditional rural character grounded in a relatively self-sufficient, agrarian way of life with strong ties to land and community as well as its remarkable natural beauty. Isolation also served to limit the availability of goods, services, employment and educational opportunities, and thus contributed to the relatively lower earnings and higher rates of unemployment and poverty that are characteristic of rural areas.

Since the 1970's, however, the Region has been experiencing both the benefits and impacts of renewed growth. This is due in large part to the increased accessibility provided by the completion of I-89 through Franklin County, and improvements to Route 2, the Rouses Point Bridge, and ferry service to Grand Isle County. A majority of the Region's population now lives within easy commuting distance of Chittenden County, and benefits from the greater opportunities for jobs, goods, and services that this proximity affords. Growth has been fueled by the development of the greater Burlington metropolitan area to the south, and strengthened economic ties with Quebec to the north. This is evidenced in the transformation of rural farming communities into bedroom and recreational communities, the conversion of farmland, the expansion of the St. Albans area, and the advent of forms of development including industrial and business parks, residential subdivisions, and commercial strip developments that typically define more suburban environments.

Though in transition, the Northwest Region still retains much of its traditional, rural character including small villages and hamlets surrounded by open countryside, and a healthy working landscape that reflects our continued reliance on resource-based economies. Approximately half the land area remains in commercial agricultural production; commercial forestry, fishing, quarrying and extraction operations, and an increasing number of related value-added industries, also continue to support local and regional economies.

The forests of Franklin County are included in recently designated "Northern Forests", extending from northern Maine to New York. Though predominantly in private ownership, these forests have been federally targeted to encourage sustainable forestry practices and compatible development that will maintain both the quality of the environment, and the health of rural communities. The Region is also part of the United Nation's "Lake Champlain-Adirondack Biosphere Reserve", one of less than 300 such reserves worldwide, designated in 1989 to promote social and economic vitality in the Lake Champlain Basin without compromising the prospects of future generations within the basin to do the same. These designations are important reminders that, though the Northwest Region may be rural, and somewhat off the beaten path, it is part of, and affected by, much larger physical, cultural, social, and economic forces. We do not live in isolation, and changes in the world around us should be considered as we seek to plan for the development of the region.

RECENT TRENDS

A short list of selected, standard social and economic indicators provided in Table 2.1 shows regional rates of growth and development over the last 30 years compared with state averages.

Perceived changes over the last 20 to 30 years, according to a 1996 survey and follow-up discussion with Regional Commissioners, which are still relevant today, included the following:

changes in transportation, resulting in significant population growth and development concentrated mainly in the towns bordering Chittenden County and along I-89;

a concentration of development in the St. Albans area industrial development in particular which at times "overshadows" smaller towns; the loss of farms and the phasing out of agriculture, resulting in a change from a primarily agricultural economy to one involving industry, tourism, services, small businesses, etc.; and concomitantly, a change from a primarily agricultural area to an increasingly suburban/urban area, including the conversion of agricultural land for development residential development in particular.

The region today, in the view of Regional Commissioners participating in the 1996 survey and discussion, remains strongly agricultural and rural in nature, with a large native born population and a strong sense of local control. Growth and development has been largely concentrated in and around existing urban centers the primary being St. Albans City which continue to serve surrounding communities. The region, however, is also strongly characterized as being in a period of transition from a predominantly agricultural region to one supporting, or having the potential to support, a more diversified economy.

The perceived benefits of recent growth and development include increased employment opportunities, a more diversified tax base and higher paying jobs. The perceived impacts include the loss of farmland to development and suburban sprawl, and with this, the loss of the region's agrarian base and rural character, along with a loss of local control and sense of community. Moreover, it was observed that both the benefits and impacts of growth have not been equitably distributed or shared. Growth in the more rapidly developing areas of the region, including the towns bordering Chittenden County, has been characterized by some as "excessive," with marked impacts on these communities; while other towns in the region away from I-89, particularly along the region's northern borders, suffer from little or no development and a stagnant or declining employment base. These perceptions are borne out in the more detailed examination of trends that follows.

Population Trends

As shown in Table 2.2 on page 2.11, the region's overall population increased by 50% or nearly 17,500 people between 1970 and 2000, and numbered 52,318 by 2000 (U.S. Census). This growth rate, averaging about 1.7% per year, approximates that experienced during the region's first fifty years of initial settlement from 1791 through 1840, and marks a significant change from the stagnant growth rate that characterized much of the 20th century. In the 1970's, 1980's, and 1990's Grand Isle County, in part because of its smaller base population, grew at a much faster rate than the state as a whole; in the 1980's and 1990's Franklin County's rate of population growth also exceeded that of the state. From 2000 to 2005, the U.S. Census estimates that high population growth rates will continue throughout the region. In particular, many towns have populations estimates increasing by more than 10 percent over the five year period, including Bakersfield, Berkshire, Fairfax, St. Albans Town, Sheldon, Grand Isle, North Hero, and South Hero.

As expected, population growth has not been distributed evenly throughout the region, but varies dramatically at the local level, as shown on the previous page in Figure 2.1. Since the 1960's, population growth measured in absolute numbers has occurred most markedly in towns along the Interstate corridor beginning in Georgia and St. Albans Town in the 1960's and then proceeding northward into Highgate and Swanton in the 1970's. In the 1990's, Alburgh, Swanton, Georgia, and Fairfax experienced the most population growth in the region, in absolute numbers. In terms of percentage increase in the 1970's and 1980's, the towns bordering Chittenden County including Georgia, Fairfax and Fletcher in Franklin County, and South Hero and Grand Isle in Grand Isle County have experienced the highest rates of growth. In the 1990's the Towns of Alburgh, North Hero, and Fairfax had the highest rates of population growth (all greater than 40%), while Bakersfield, Fletcher, Montgomery, and South Hero grew by more than 20%. Between 1970 and 2000 much of the rest of the region, with the exception St. Albans City and the four incorporated villages, experienced moderate amounts and rates of growth.

Population increase is the result of two factors: natural increase (where the number of births exceed the number of deaths) and/or net in-migration (where the number of people moving into a community exceeds the number moving out). Net in-migration from 1990 to 2000 is shown in Figure 2.2 to the right. The data indicates that in those towns where population growth has been the greatest it has been the result of both natural increase and net in-migration. In five towns North Hero, Grand Isle, Fairfax, Fletcher and Montgomery, net in-migration accounted for the majority of population increase through the 1980's. In others towns, including Georgia, Bakersfield, Highgate, Franklin and Berkshire in Franklin County, and South Hero and Isle La Motte in Grand Isle County, in-migration in the 1970's resulted in higher rates of

natural increase in the 1980's. The Town of Enosburg shifted from growth predominantly due to natural increase in the 1970's, to in-migration in the 1980's. Population increases (or decreases) in the region's other towns and villages through the 1980's, including Alburgh, Swanton, Fairfield, Sheldon, and Richford, were due primarily to natural increase (or decrease). During the 1990's, net in-migration was greatest in Alburgh and Fairfax. High in-migration in relatively remote Alburgh may be due to inexpensive land prices compared to other Island towns. Net in-migration was greater than natural increase in all Grand Isle County towns, Fairfax, St. Albans Town, Franklin, Enosburgh, Bakersfield, and Montgomery. All town's in the region, experienced some in-migration during the 1990's, except for Fairfield.

The small size of the population base, particularly at the local level, makes long-term forecasting difficult at best. Most models assume that in-migration, driven in part by continued economic growth and development, will continue, but natural increases will level off somewhat, given the overall aging of the population and that average family and household sizes are getting smaller.

Population Characteristics

Age Distribution

With the aging of the "baby boom" population, the region's overall population is aging, following state and national trends, as indicated by steady increases in median age. In recent years increases in the working-aged population, due in part to in-migration, has resulted in an increased demand for housing within many communities in the region. The children of the baby boom generation (the "baby boomlet") also have resulted in increased school enrollments, and thus the demand for educational facilities and services. Over the next ten to twenty years, however, as more people enter their retirement years and -live longer, it is anticipated that the region's school and working-aged populations will decline in relative proportion to its elderly population (Table 2.4).

and services throughout the region as noted by the number of recent and proposed school additions in the future may be supplemented or replaced by the need for more facilities and services oriented toward the region's growing elderly population, including increased residential care facilities and services. The largest group will continue to be those in their wage-earning years those who contribute most to the local and regional economies, and also demand the most in terms of housing, goods, services, and supporting infrastructure.

Special Needs Populations

Census data also provide limited information on special needs populations in the region. In 2000, of the 33,360 non-institutionalized persons in the region between the ages or 16 and 64, 540 (1.6%) reported having self-care limitations, and 2,308 (6.9%) a disability that limited employment or prevented them from working. For those 65 years or more (totaling 5,605) 8.9% noted a self-care limitation. It is anticipated that, with the projected increase in the region's elderly population over the next ten to twenty years, the number of elderly persons with special needs will increase accordingly.

Educational Levels

According to 2000 Census data, over three-quarters of the region's residents over the age of 25 had completed their high school educations and a significant number had gone on to earn college degrees or higher. Educational attainment levels, however, fell behind those for the state as a whole (Table 2.5). This may be due in part to the fact that affordable opportunities for higher education within the region are limited there are no four-year college programs available in either county at present. High school completion rates in Franklin County typically are slightly lower than the state average (84% compared with 88% statewide for 2005), though this varies by school. Grand Isle County does not have a high school.

Income and Poverty Levels

The Northwest region is located in what is considered to be the most affluent part of the state because of the relative importance of Chittenden County to the state's economy. According to 2000 Census data,

however, median income levels for the region tend to be less than those for the state, and poverty levels are higher (Table 2.6). This is due to the fact that income levels vary significantly at the local level, reflecting in part available employment opportunities and prevailing wages. Residents in the St. Albans area, and in those towns within easy commuting distance of Chittenden County (e.g., southern Franklin and Grand Isle Counties) tend to report higher median incomes. Towns more distant from major employment centers exhibited lower incomes and higher poverty levels. Poverty levels also tend to be higher for related children under 18 years of age (10.4% in Franklin County, 9.2% in Grand Isle County) and the elderly (10.3% in Franklin County, 7.9% in Grand Isle County).

More recent town-based income and poverty indicators, included in Table 2.7, provide additional information regarding the wide variation in income and poverty at the local level. According to state estimates, median adjusted incomes (estimated from 2005 tax returns) for the region are typically higher than that for the state. Adjusted median incomes in the region ranged from \$22,602 (77.3% of the state median) to \$42,768 (146.3% of the state median); thirteen of twenty municipalities exceeded the state median. Not surprisingly, most of these municipalities are within easy commuting distance of Chittenden County, and have the lowest public assistance rates.

The percentages of the region's 2005 population receiving public assistance in the form of the Reach Up Program and food stamps was slightly higher than that for the state in Franklin County, and lower in Grand Isle County. Again, wide variation the local level suggests that there are pockets of real poverty within both counties. Typically, assistance rates tend to be highest where population is concentrated in the region's urban areas. This type of data provides some indication of where to target future public assistance and job development efforts in relation to identified need.

ECONOMIC TRENDS

Economic development in the region is coordinated and planned by regional economic development corporations and chambers of commerce in each of the counties. The Franklin County Industrial Development Corporation (FCIDC) and the Regional Development Corporation for Grand Isle have developed Strategic Economic Development Plans, which outline economic strategies and goals for the region. Below, the Northwest Regional Plan includes descriptions of these two organizations (excerpted from their websites) and a list of economic development strategies and goals from the Franklin County Strategic Economic Development Plan and the Economic Development Strategic Plan for Grand Isle. In a future amendment, the 2007 Northwest Regional Plan will include an Economic Development Chapter based on these two plans.

**The "region" may be defined for planning purposes as "communities of shared interests, resources and landmarks working toward common goals."
*Board of Commissioners, January 1996***

**Northwest Region
 Municipalities
Franklin County
Grand Isle County**

Highgate	Isle La Motte	Fletcher
Montgomery	North Hero	Franklin
Richford	South Hero	Georgia
St. Albans City	Bakersfield	Alburgh Town
St. Albans Town	Berkshire	Alburgh Village
Sheldon	Enosburg Falls	Grand Isle
Swanton Town	Enosburgh Town Fairfax	
Swanton Village	Fairfield	

Key Strategies for Franklin County Development

Build a workforce to make a competitive difference: Work cooperatively with local, regional, and state workforce development-training partners to assure that the required skills sets and work ethic are widely available to employers in the region, with particular emphasis on the basic and advanced skill sets needed by Franklin County's current and future key economic driver sectors.

Retain a vibrant base of quality jobs: Design and implement an aggressive and targeted retention program focused on regional economic driver sectors and existing significant Franklin County employers.

Strategic recruitment for a vibrant base of quality jobs to help diversify the regional economy: Design and implement an aggressive and targeted recruitment program focused on regional economic driver sectors and existing significant Franklin County employers.

Promote infrastructure readiness for a high performance Franklin County economy: Develop and continuously improve the infrastructure assets of the region to help improve and sustain regional competitiveness and a high quality of life.

Create a permit-development review climate of efficiency and predictability: Work cooperatively to streamline the region's development review and permitting processes to build regional competitiveness advantage.

Improve access to affordable capital for regional businesses: Work cooperatively with federal, state, and regional partners to improve Franklin County business' access to the affordable equity and early-stage debt capital resources needed for the region's entrepreneurs and start-up businesses

Strengthen affordable workforce housing: Forge strategic partnerships for creating a full range of housing options across the entire pricing spectrum to affordably house the regional workforce in Franklin County.

Maintain a quality of life in Franklin County that assures long-term economic success: Work cooperatively with economic development and other partners to maintain/improve a quality of life in Franklin County that is necessary to attract and retain the type of talented workforce required for a high performance regional economy.

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(Excerpted from the Franklin County Strategic Economic Development Plan)