

Reversing Population Trends

Goal

Much of rural Massachusetts has stagnant or declining population, is growing older and lacks diversity. Without dedicated intervention, population projections foresee these trends continuing, which create numerous rural sustainability challenges. As a Commonwealth, we should work to guide our policies and practices to encourage more balanced population growth, especially working to retain and attract more young people to rural areas of Massachusetts.

Key Issues

General Description of Focus Area and issue

Franklin and Berkshire Counties and the Outer Cape have had stagnant and/or declining population growth for the last 20 years. Population forecasting models project a 18.5% population decline in Barnstable County between 2010 and 2040, a 2.7% decline in Franklin County and a 2.4% decline in Berkshire County during the same time period. While other parts of rural MA are projected to grow in population between 2010 and 2040, no part of MA will grow nearly as fast Suffolk County (Boston), which is projected to grow by 31.6%. This imbalance of population will further exacerbate the snarl of traffic congestion and exorbitant housing prices in Greater Boston while making life in rural MA even more challenging because of a lack of jobs and basic services.

Regional examples that highlight the issue

Foreign-born individuals, who largely represent the population growth in MA, have stayed within the I-495 belt and are not moving to rural MA.

Most of the state local aid categories, which is aid distributed to municipalities, use formulas that include population. On average across MA, 20% of municipal revenue is state local aid. In Franklin County local aid makes up only 16% of local revenue. In comparison, 58% of Springfield's revenue and 41% of Worcester's revenue come from state aid.

The statewide municipal average of people aged 65 and older is 15.5%. The rural aging issue is most severe on the Cape where the percentage is significantly higher: the lowest share for towns on the Cape is Sandwich with 20.1% of the population over age 65 and it is a staggering 39.4% in Chatham. This dynamic challenges housing prices, school enrollment, workforce and service delivery with fewer young workers and school-age children versus older populations. Compounding this problem is that Cape Cod, by and large, is built out so the population on the Cape needs to shift, not grow.

Existing Policies and Programs

Population-Based Funding Formulas. More than 132 federal programs use population in funding formulas totaling \$689 billion of federal aid. In Massachusetts Chapter 90, Chapter 70, library incentive grants, STRAP, Mass Cultural Council grants, PARC grants, fire assistance grants and more use population in the funding formula leaving rural municipalities with less funding to adequately maintain infrastructure, educate children and be competitive for discretionary grants.

S208 An Act Establishing the Western Massachusetts Remote Worker Relocation Incentive Program. State Senator Eric Lesser has introduced legislation that would create a grant program to be used to incent workers to leave the Boston area and move to western MA to work remotely by offering a relocation allowance of up to \$10,000 over a 2-year period. Some in rural MA are supportive of this concept while others worry about a lack of community investment and involvement.

Best Practices

Vermont's Remote Worker Grant and Stay to Stay Programs. In an effort to attract workers to VT, two initiatives have been developed. The *Remote Worker Grant Program* pays individuals up to \$10,000 to relocate to Vermont. *Stay to Stay* is a marketing program that encourages people coming to VT for a weekend getaway to stay a day longer to learn about business and employment opportunities.

Live and Work in Maine. "Come here to live and work, and the State will reimburse your student loan payments" is the opening salvo of the *Live and Work in Maine* – a public-private initiative to promote work and life in Maine in recognition that the state's demographic trends indicate a reducing and older population. The initiative includes a student loan forgiveness program for people that went to college in Maine and now live and work in Maine, opportunities for employers to highlight their companies and employment opportunities, a job site for job seekers, and testimonials from people that have relocated to ME.

Town-Subsidized Childcare and Universal Pre-K. With the goals of helping and attracting young families to the Cape and to fill empty classrooms in elementary schools with declining enrollment, Town Meeting voters in Chatham and Wellfleet voted to subsidize and provide childcare in schools. Provincetown voters supported universal Pre K for residents and municipal employees.

Cape Cod Young Professionals (CCYP). Promoting Cape Cod, attracting young professionals, and making it easier for young professionals to live and work on the Cape are the goals of CCYP. One of their marketing efforts is "My Cape Cod Story" that highlight the life, work and social activities of young adults that have chosen Cape Cod as their home.

Recommendations

It is recognized that all of the recommendations included in this Plan will benefit rural communities. If this Plan and the work of the RPAC are successful, population trends will begin to reverse. That said, the following recommendations are designed to specifically address the issue of reversing population trends.

Create the MA Office of Rural Policy by enacting S205 and H364, An Act to Relative to the Rural Policy Advisory Commission. Creation of the RPAC has given focus to the challenges faced by rural communities, businesses and residents but the Commission's work is limited as an unstaffed and unfunded appointed Commission. An Office of Rural Policy will provide consistent, productive focus on rural issues in the Commonwealth.

Develop a statewide land use plan and strategy. Population forecasts that portend significant population growth in Boston and continued population decline in the most rural parts of MA is not a good, long-term growth pattern for MA. Boston will be nearly uninhabitable because of traffic congestion and even higher housing prices while rural MA will struggle to provide basic services to citizens. MA should develop a thoughtful land use strategy that identifies a more desirable growth pattern that balances economic, climate resiliency and carbon sequestration, food security, and conservation needs. Targeted strategies should be identified and implemented to disburse future growth in a more deliberate and beneficial way.

Replicate Maine and Vermont relocation strategies targeted to rural areas of MA. Learning from the success of our neighbors to attract more and younger people to their rural states should be emulated for the rural regions of MA. Student loan forgiveness, marketing rural MA as places to live and work, and relocation incentives should be explored.

Expand racial and ethnic diversity in rural MA. A multi-faceted strategy is required to make rural MA a more comfortable, welcoming and inclusive environment for all people. This includes working to understand historical instances of exclusion and existing biases and conditions, removing existing barriers to racial and cultural diversity, and developing housing, education, social and employment opportunities for all.

Study the feasibility and equity of a rurality factor in statewide funding formulas to ease the disparity of population playing such a significant role in funding formulas.

Support rural Young Professional Societies. Young people that choose to live and work in rural MA are our best source for effective strategies to attract more young people to rural MA. Providing resources to efforts specifically aimed at marketing and attracting young people, like the Cape Cod YPS “My Cape Cod Story”, should be pursued.

Ensure that every rural MA resident is counted in 2020 U.S Decennial Census. While this recommendation will not reverse population trends, it will ensure that rural MA is accurately represented for the next decade. Lack of broadband and cell service, limited access to television and public media and isolation make Census response challenging in rural MA. All rural regions have already formed Complete Count Committees to meet this goal.

Prepare rural communities for the aging of their population. Towns should increase their use of Community Compact funds to begin Age-Friendly community planning.

For Appendix

<https://www.liveandworkinmaine.com/>

<https://www.vermontvacation.com/staytostay>

<https://accd.vermont.gov/economic-development/remoteworkergrantprogram>

<https://capecodyoungprofessionals.org/about-us/strategic-priorities>

Stakeholders consulted: Many people, agencies and organizations were consulted in the drafting of this Plan. Recommendations contained in this document are not necessarily supported or endorsed by all parties listed below.

Rural YPS'
All stakeholder sessions

DRAFT