

# SPECIAL AREA MANAGEMENT PLANS: A POWERFUL TOOL FOR PLANNING IN URBAN AREAS

*By Malia Schwartz and Monica Allard Cox*

Each one is unique, but special area management plans (SAMPs) share one thing in common: Each is a powerful strategic planning tool for coastal resource managers—in part because once approved, SAMPs have federal recognition, meaning that both the state and federal governments must abide by the plans.

The R.I. Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) is recognized as a national leader in SAMP development. In developing SAMPs, the CRMC has brought about specific management strategies rooted in the council’s legislative mandate, which states that “...the preservation and restoration of ecological ecosystems shall be the primary guiding principle upon which environmental alteration of coastal resources will be measured, judged, and regulated” for a variety of areas within the state. Each selected coastal ecosystem has its own unique set of characteristics and problems.

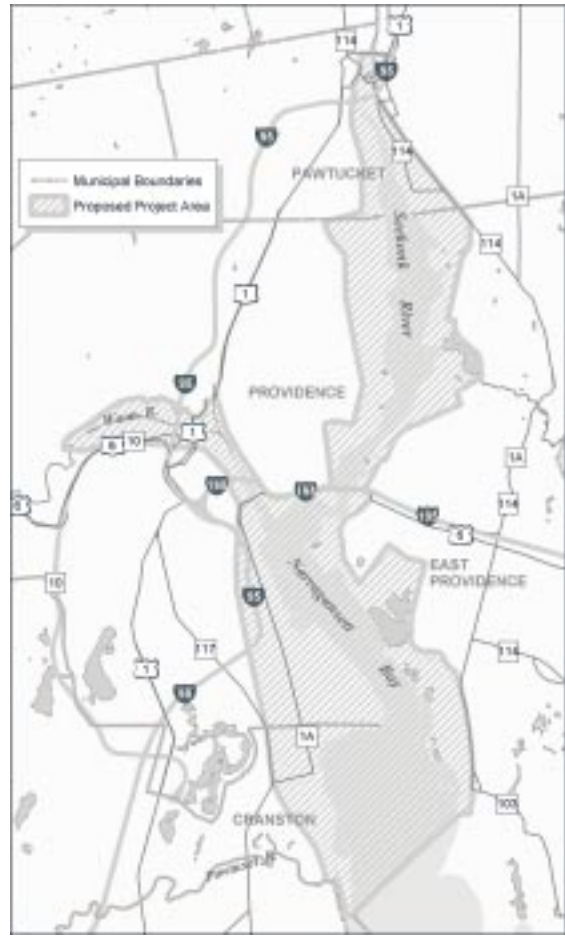
The strategy of the SAMPs is to recognize how water quality, land use, habitat, storm hazards, and geology all interact on an ecosystem level to impact the health of an area. Coastal managers use SAMPs when the problems in a distinct area go beyond what can be addressed by existing local, state, and federal policies.

“SAMPs are the most comprehensive tools we have and we need to invest in them,” said the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Timothy Keeney, deputy assistant secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere, in his comments made at the Governor’s Narragansett Bay and Watershed Summit this fall. He went on to say that the strength of the SAMPs lies in their being tailored to a specific area, allowing for flexibility and facilitating implementation.

Through the newly adopted Marine Resources Development Plan (MRDP)—designed to bring resource policy in line with the major changes in the state’s coastal environment—CRMC is coordinating with state environmental agencies, including the Department of Environmental Management, the Division of Planning, and the Economic Development Corporation, to create new SAMPs to monitor areas at ecosystem levels, says Michael Tikoian, CRMC chairman. A major undertaking is the creation of an urban SAMP for the Metro Bay region.

### **Metro Bay SAMP**

Narragansett Bay’s largest urban waterfront, roughly 24 miles of shoreline bordering the cities of Cranston, East Providence, Pawtucket, and Providence, is a largely untapped natural resource and economic engine. It was once the site of industrialization and progress, but over the years has become outdated and underutilized. The cities are now acting to make this region of upper Narragansett Bay a more appealing place to live and work by improving the economic, social, and environmental resources of the working waterfront; attracting major



*This map illustrates the areas covered by the Metro Bay SAMP. Map courtesy The Providence Plan.*

developers with more predictable and efficient permitting; and providing recreation and access to the water.

The Metro Bay SAMP aims to accomplish these goals and provide a functional framework for future environmentally and economically sensitive redevelopment within the SAMP boundary encompassing most of the waterfront in the four cities. Rhode Island Sea Grant/URI Coastal Resources Center (CRC) has been facilitating many of the SAMP efforts for CRMC by engaging the Metro Bay cities to address regional issues.

Jennifer McCann, Rhode Island Sea Grant/CRC Sustainable Coastal Communities and Ecosystems Extension leader, says that the “carrot and stick” approach of the Metro Bay SAMP has been key to its effectiveness. “Since this is a regulatory document that will make a difference in people’s lives, it’s helped us bring a wide and diverse constituency together that has been actively participating in crafting the plan. It also is a real opportunity to solve regional issues by pooling the region’s resources in a way that would not otherwise be done, and attracting other financial and technical resources.” She cites low-impact development trainings for government and developers and implementing actions to make the Metro Bay region natural-disaster resilient as examples of activities that have grown out of the SAMP.



This SAMP also represents a milestone for CRMC, as it will update the Providence Harbor SAMP that the council developed more than 20 years ago. Since that time, the cities of upper Narragansett Bay have prospered from economic growth and cultural renewal, as well as a renewed appreciation for the waterfront and its natural values. These changes have, of course, brought challenges, as cities struggle to balance redevelopment goals and efforts to provide public access to the water.

### Permitting

Along with this revitalization has been an accompanying upswell in permit requests for developing properties along the area's shoreline. CRMC recognized that its regulations pertaining to coastal vegetative buffers—which apply along the state's greater than 400-mile coastline—were not well suited for urban areas where many sites are classified as brownfields or are

otherwise challenging parcels due to significant site constraints. To develop or redevelop in the Metro Bay area, developers had to obtain significant variances to coastal buffer requirements, a process that gave the state little in return for granting the variance.

The Metro Bay SAMP addresses these challenges, combining a more streamlined permitting process with benefits to the state in the form of public access and the creation of a greenway corridor along the region's shoreline. (See "A Green Way to Grow," page 14.)

### Natural Hazards

The SAMP also addresses natural hazards, particularly hurricanes, which are predicted to increasingly target the Northeast over the next several years. Part of the SAMP process includes working with the cities to update their hazard mitigation plans, especially their evacuation routes, in concert with each other. (See "Upper Bay Cities Prepare for An Ill Wind," page 20.)

### Water Uses

CRMC plans shortly to amend its water classifications in the Metro Bay region to create consistency with current municipal development vision plans. CRMC staff are also engaged in a longer-range review of water types and other policy options to minimize conflicts among recreational, industrial, and residential users of the Bay. (See "No Escaping BayScape," page 24.)

"The Metro Bay region is a gem for the people of Rhode Island and has long been home to one of the country's key urban waterfront areas. As such, CRMC is committed to creating a management plan that protects, enhances, and honors this important heritage," says Tikoian.

## Land Use 2025 Promotes Urban/Rural Systems Approach

"If we continue development at this current rate, we'll be out of land in 20 to 30 years," warns Kevin Flynn, R.I. Division of Planning associate director. "It took 330 years to develop the first 20 percent of the land in Rhode Island; it only took 25 years to develop the next 10 percent."

This rapid development has been characterized by sprawl, which not only consumes open space and impacts natural resources, but also contributes to traffic congestion, increases dependency on automobiles and isolates those who don't drive, and requires redundant taxpayer investments in infrastructure and public facilities.

To address this, the R.I. Division of Planning undertook a lengthy public process to produce *Land Use 2025*—the state land-use plan for the next two decades—which the State Planning Council approved in 2006.

So where do we want to be in 20 years? The vision of *Land Use 2025* is for Rhode Island to retain its distinctive landscape, history, and natural resources while growing to meet economic and housing needs. The plan envisions Rhode Island as a constellation of community centers connected by infrastructure corridors and framed by green space.

The plan urges an "urban/rural approach" that reflects Rhode Island's existing distinction between historic urban centers and more rural surrounding areas.

According to the plan, "Today, one can leave downtown Providence and be 'in the country' in 20 minutes. This is a tremendous asset that is increasingly rare in thriving metropolitan areas. Settlement around waterfront and manufacturing centers remains the dominant feature of the state's landscape, despite the decline in manufacturing and the disinvestments in urban areas. Nevertheless, this urban/rural distinction will be in jeopardy if we continue to develop in accord with current trends."

Following the urban/rural approach, the plan calls for a strategy that recognizes and supports more intensive land use in the urban residential corridor. The plan encourages local land-use policies that focus on preserving or enhancing neighborhoods, traditional villages, and communities, and promoting mass transit, pedestrian environments, affordable housing, compact development, public infrastructure, and urban design. In the more rural areas of the state and along the forested corridors, south shore beaches, salt ponds, and the Bay islands, the plan advocates a level of residential and recreational land use consistent with preserving natural resources and retaining open spaces. This new urban/rural approach is outlined on the Future State Land Use Plan Map, which indicates the area within the "Urban Services Boundary" along with complementary "Growth Centers" that are anticipated

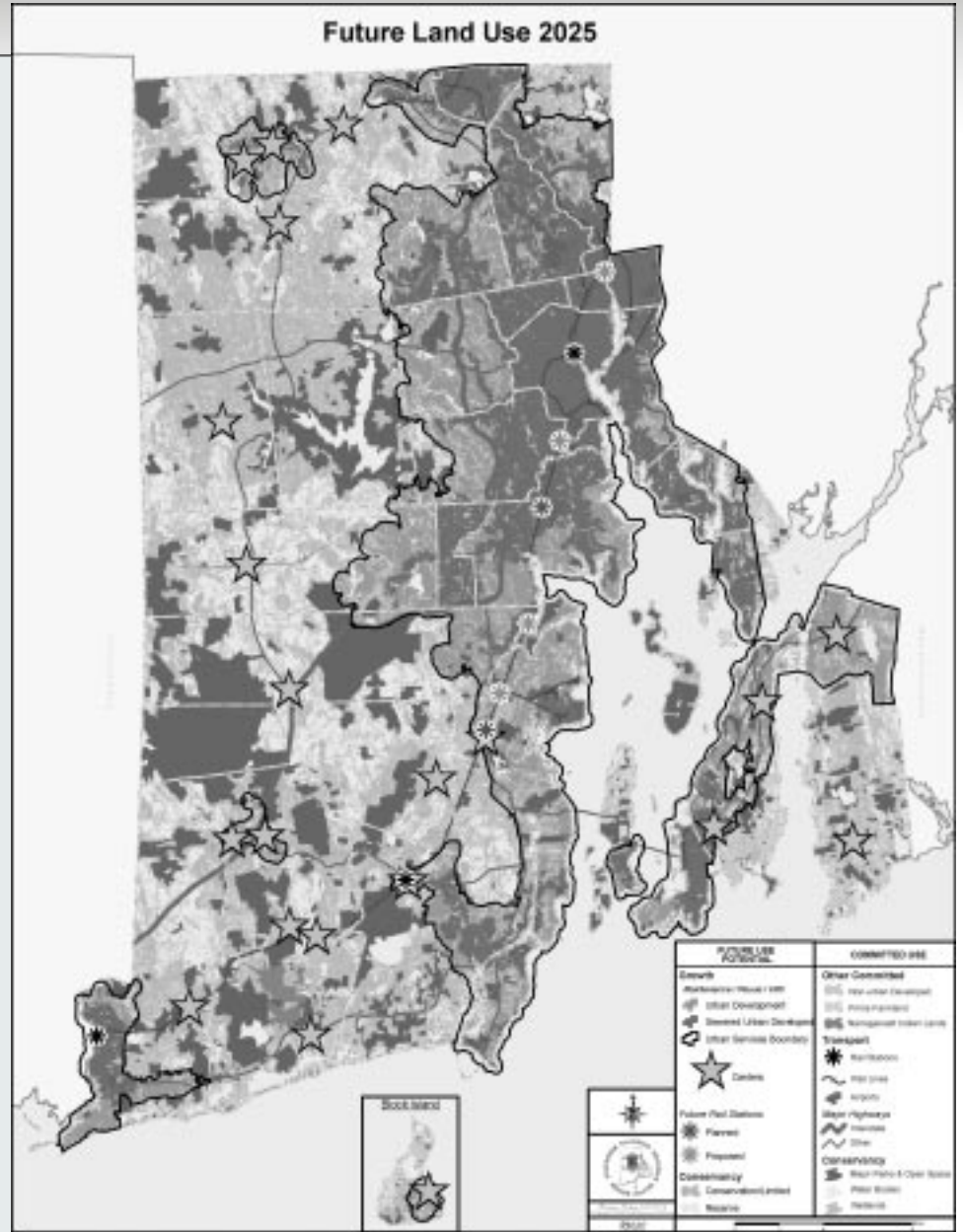
to have a high level of public services available and be the location of more intensive development through 2025. Areas outside the urban services boundary and growth centers are anticipated to have a lower level of public services available, and are generally proposed for lower-intensity development to preserve conservation areas and productive rural resource lands. Several watersheds and other sensitive resource areas that already have public water service have been excluded from the urban services boundary, indicating that protection of the resources involved must be a principal concern limiting future development.

"We must work to restrict development to already developed areas contained within the urban services boundary and growth centers," says Flynn. Interestingly, due to historic urban development and Rhode Islanders' desire to live near the shore, the urban services boundary encompasses virtually the entire Narragansett Bay shoreline. So how does *Land Use 2025* reconcile the paradox of redeveloping urban coastal areas while preserving the shoreline?

"*Land Use 2025* identifies Rhode Island's entire shoreline as an area of special concern, where high development pressures will certainly continue," says Flynn. "Careful conservation and development measures must manage use along the shores of the inland lakes and rivers as well as the oceanfront and the Bay. Achieving excellent land management and customized urban design guidelines for the edge of the Bay is one of the biggest challenges faced by *Land Use 2025*."

Of course, the state land-use plan can only go so far—implementation of the plan must happen at the local level, since this is where land-use decisions are made. While municipalities' comprehensive plans must be in alignment with the state land-use plan, the R.I. Division of Planning is also undertaking several initiatives, including directing grant funding to municipal projects compatible with the plan, to encourage cities and towns to fully support *Land Use 2025*.

Rhode Island Sea Grant published, for the R.I. Division of Planning, an Executive Summary of *Land Use 2025*. Copies are available on-line at: [www.planning.ri.gov/landuse/policies.htm](http://www.planning.ri.gov/landuse/policies.htm) or by mail by contacting Nancy Hess, R.I. Division of Planning principal environmental planner, at (401) 222-6480. The entire land-use plan is available on-line at the website listed above.



The Future Land Use 2025 map illustrates the desired patterns of Rhode Island's future development and conservation as outlined in Land Use 2025. Image courtesy of R.I. Division of Planning.

—Malia Schwartz is Communications Director for Rhode Island Sea Grant; Monica Allard Cox is a Communicator for Rhode Island Sea Grant.