



# Granite State Future: New Hampshire Planning Commissions Develop Statewide Strategy

## Quick Information

**Organization(s):** Central New Hampshire Regional Planning Commission (RPC), Lakes RPC, Nashua RPC, North Country RPC, Rockingham RPC, Southern New Hampshire RPC, Southwest RPC, Strafford RPC, Upper Valley Lake Sunapee RPC

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**Website:** <http://www.granitestatefuture.org/>

**Cooperation Topic(s):** Public Engagement; Statewide Planning

**Cooperation Practice(s):** Joint Planning Products

**Cost Information:** Effort funded through U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Sustainable Communities Grant. Grant divided among participating agencies, Nashua RPC received slightly larger portion to cover administration of grant.

The differences between rural, suburban, and urban communities can be stark, which makes statewide planning challenging. Although New Hampshire has a population of about 1.3 million people, the communities spread across its nine planning regions are diverse. To integrate planning efforts throughout the State, the State's nine RPCs worked together on [Granite State Future](#), the State's largest ever visioning, regional planning, and public involvement campaign.

## Motivation for Establishing the Collaboration

New Hampshire law requires the State's nine Regional Planning Commission (RPCs) to develop comprehensive regional plans. Though the nine RPC directors meet monthly to coordinate their work, it is still a challenge for regions to coordinate their planning efforts to get an overall picture of New Hampshire's future. When the Nashua Regional Planning Commission (NRPC) volunteered to pursue a substantial U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) grant, the other eight RPCs agreed to support NRPC. The RPCs decided that competing locally for Federal funding would not be advantageous if none of them were awarded funds, and conversely, that working together could benefit everyone involved.

In its first attempt, NRPC submitted an application on behalf of the State's RPCs for a 2010 HUD grant but did not receive funding. In 2011, the consortium applied again and was awarded \$3,369,648 to implement Granite State Future, a three-year, community-based public dialogue about what New Hampshire residents wanted for the future of their communities. The program culminated in updates to each of the nine RPCs' regional plans in late 2014.

## Collaboration Structure

NRPC took the lead in administering the grant and ensuring that the RPCs and their constituents participated in the effort. The consortium's first task was to develop integrated marketing products that encompassed a common language and messaging, as well as a website and logo. This communications framework was designed to guarantee that the RPCs would communicate the same basic information in a consistent, shared voice throughout the program.

Granite State Future was organized into three phases. Years one and two focused on engaging citizens and leaders through a broad visioning process, followed by local working sessions that focused on specific areas of local interest. In year two, each region conducted a regional needs assessment to set goals and priorities and developed components of the regional plan. In year three each region reviewed the plan. All nine RPCs finished drafting plans in late 2014, and as of 2016, all of those plans were adopted.

The leaders had planned to spend only a few months conducting public outreach and participatory activities, but soon realized they needed to spend more time. The public participation process required more than a year to successfully understand residents' needs and perspectives. However, this was a crucial component of Granite State Future's success, because it allowed the planning team to secure the buy-in of community members who were initially skeptical that a statewide visioning campaign would adequately address their individual region's interests. One region framed its public engagement meeting as a "night to listen" and gave every community member in attendance the opportunity to ask questions and provide input on the current plans. Additionally, the planning team organized focus groups to obtain feedback from social service agencies with clients who typically cannot participate in the planning process, such as non-English speakers and individuals who cannot read. Through these agencies, the RPCs partnered with a State agency to hold a summer block party and spent a full day there engaging underrepresented community members. That Granite State Future leaders believed giving every community member a chance to say their piece went a long way in securing long-term support for the effort.

Collaboration between the agencies and stakeholders was required from the start of the Granite State Future initiative. Project managers at each of the RPCs met monthly to work on product and plan development, and a statewide advisory committee met quarterly to ensure that each RPC was on schedule. In order to synthesize the data collected within each region and produce the preliminary [Regional Plan Framework](#) and [Statewide Existing Conditions and Trends](#) reports, NRPC worked with the eight other RPCs to collect data pieces on each region using a shared reporting template,

## Takeaways

- New Hampshire's nine RPCs worked together on Granite State Future, the State's largest ever visioning, regional planning, and public involvement campaign.
- Collaboration enabled the RPCs of a small State to submit a more competitive proposal for Federal funding that benefited all regions.
- The RPCs conducted a robust public engagement effort to secure buy-in from skeptical community members and gather a variety of input.
- Nashua RPC took the lead in compiling findings from each region.
- The RPCs learned that flexibility is essential in order to accommodate everyone's needs and develop a stronger final product.

categorize it by topic, and organize the findings. To develop the [Core Metrics Methodologies for Regional Comprehensive Plans](#), a committee with representatives from all nine RPCs identified common metrics, delegated metrics to each RPC to perform suitability assessments on each one, and then collectively selected which metrics to use. Then, the committee divided the metrics again and each RPC prepared methodologies for its assigned metrics for all New Hampshire towns. NRPC then compiled the data using spreadsheets and Geographic Information System (GIS) technology.

To develop the final [Statewide Snapshot](#), NRPC developed an additional template through which the other RPCs identified and submitted the top issues, opportunities, trends, and goals from their regional plans. NRPC then identified similarities and differences in these datasets, and this formed the basis for the Statewide Snapshot. This was an iterative process, and NRPC emphasized accuracy in the final product.

Technical advisory subcommittees comprised of subject matter experts assembled and met as needed to work through issues and share solutions among the RPC staff throughout the State. Staff developed a Google site for working documents that allowed them to communicate and share information, including data, methodologies, and lessons learned. This reduced the risk of duplicating efforts within and among the RPCs, saving both time and money.

From the beginning of the grant period, the RPCs met to discuss communications and development of the Granite State Future website. They developed an internal staff communications structure that facilitated delegation of tasks and created a subcommittee to support website development. They hired a communications professional to help curate appropriate, uniform information and graphics to include in the website. Once all RPCs agreed on a general outline, they divided the task of developing webpage content between the RPCs so no one agency faced an undue burden. Now, each region's pages are dynamic sources of information that are continually updated with new projects and information.

In addition to establishing several levels of coordination among the RPCs, NRPC coordinated project work with multiple departments at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) and with more than 100 local partners. UNH's Carsey Institute helped to educate the regions about how to conduct equitable public outreach. The University also assisted with a statewide telephone survey, conducted climate impact assessments, and provided GIS data support.

The RPCs developed an implementation matrix that allows them to compare the implementation actions each RPC is promoting for the future and rank them (as high, medium, or low) as the strategies are rolled out.

## Collaboration Accomplishments

The Granite State Future process provided New Hampshire's RPCs an opportunity to work together and with other organizations to identify a common vision and goals across the State. New Hampshire law mandates RPCs to complete regional plans. Although planning staff are supposed to consult other regions in developing these plans, such communication had rarely occurred before the start of Granite State Future. Partners such as the New Hampshire American Association of Retired Persons chapter and NH Listens have been supportive of the program and have continued to work with the RPCs since Granite State Future concluded in 2014.

Building trust with local communities and residents in a State that is historically suspicious of large planning projects was key to the success of the initiative. The RPCs strengthened their relationships with communities by extending the amount of time and opportunities to gather public input and ensuring that participants knew their voices were heard, no matter their input. As a result, the Statewide Snapshot and plans reflect both commonalities and differences among regions and communities, highlighting that the process did not require complete unification on ideas about the future.

The regions and their residents now have a better understanding of the attributes and interests of their neighbors throughout the State, as a result of the extensive public engagement conducted for the project. Each region is able to extract information from the Statewide Snapshot to inform its own regional plans and processes. The staff at each RPC built strong relationships among each other; they are more comfortable communicating with each other to seek advice and conduct other collaborative projects.

The RPCs presented the products developed during the Granite State Future program to the Governor and the New Hampshire Office of Energy and Planning (OEP) as resources for the OEP to utilize for its own initiatives. The OED actively uses the Snapshot in its work, and there have been discussions about using Granite State Future products as a basis for the future New Hampshire Statewide Development Plan.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

Given the length of the project timeline and the sheer number of stakeholders involved, maintaining momentum throughout the plan development process was a challenge. This was particularly true in the second year of the project when RPCs focused their efforts in their own regions. Having a project lead in NRPC, identifying milestones and deadlines, and maintaining regular communication among RPCs were essential to moving the project forward.

Overcoming skepticism of large-scale planning processes from communities and individuals across the State was another major challenge. Discussions regarding sustainability and climate change were particularly sensitive. The RPCs discovered that it was important to minimize planning jargon and to be

open to feedback from a variety of perspectives. Throughout the program, the RPCs listened to stakeholders' variety of concerns and thus were able to deliver stronger, more tenable products as a result. Planners learned that it is essential to be flexible and to accommodate the interests of others as much as possible, even if such actions lengthen the project timeline.

The Granite State Future program galvanized local communities throughout New Hampshire to be active participants in planning for their futures, offering fresh perspectives and motivating the RPCs to collaborate in other ways. In fact, another RPC in New Hampshire recently received a Second Strategic Highway Research Program grant for a performance management effort. In this case, that agency has taken on the “aggregator” role in organizing metropolitan planning organizations that NRPC filled during the Granite State Future effort. By working together on a common program, the RPCs were able to share a new source of Federal funding, save time and money, and most importantly, benefit the communities that they serve.

### **Additional Resources**

- [Granite State Future Website](#)
- [Core Metrics Methodologies for Regional Comprehensive Plans](#)
- [Regional Plan Framework](#)
- [Statewide Snapshot](#)