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Smart Growth and Land Acquisition Priorities: A Cursory Review

New England Environmental Finance Center

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Smart Growth and Land Acquisition Priorities

A Cursory Review

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It is well-known and generally accepted that all undeveloped land in New England cannot forever be protected from development; nor would this be a desirable goal, as continued economic development and population growth are near certainties. For these and other reasons, private land trusts and government agencies generally use explicit criteria to prioritize their land acquisition activities and prospects.

Much land protection in New England and elsewhere, however, has occurred without substantial attention to such land use needs as fostering the best locations for where people will live, businesses will locate, and infrastructure will be built to avoid degrading resources. For the NE/EFC, this fact highlighted the need to review land purchase prioritization approaches, and to determine the desirability and feasibility of creating a tool to help land conservation be less haphazard with regard to these other land use needs.

A cursory review of purchase-decision methods was conducted in Spring 2002 via literature search and phone conversations with several dozen public agency representatives and private land protection organizations. The review suggested that development of a single, growth-oriented, purchase-decision tool might not be particularly useful; nor would it be possible without a substantial research and development effort.

Every land purchase opportunity is unique, due to the diverse characteristics of land, ecosystem types, recreational opportunities, etc, as well as to differing levels of development pressure and potential interest from funders. As a result, conservation land purchase decisions tend to be more opportunistic than strategic; and written purchase-decision criteria most often function as general guidelines, such that deviation from them is more often the rule than the exception.

The review also reinforced the observation that prioritization methods generally do not incorporate growth-related concerns; and that while prioritization plans are often disregarded in practice, they are also often adhered to, and can be essential to the development of a strategic land conservation program.

Growth issues often differ dramatically between contexts, as between rural and urban places. This suggests that while creation of a single, model purchase decision tool is probably neither desirable nor feasible, smart growth in general would be enhanced greatly if more land protection organizations were to incorporate growth-related concerns into their prioritization plans.

For information about growth principles that could be reflected in prioritization plans, good starting references include the documents “[Getting to Smart Growth](#)” and “[Greenprinting for Growth](#)”.