

PLANNING DEPARTMENT MEMORANDUM

TO: Coventry Planning Commission

FROM: Doug McLean, Director of Planning and Development

DATE: March 20, 2026

SUBJECT: DRAFT 2026 Comprehensive Community Plan Update

I. Background Information

The Town of Coventry proposes a Comprehensive Community Plan Update to replace the 1999 Comprehensive Plan, which expired in 2004, and provides a much-needed update to the Town's policy structure moving forward. The DRAFT 2026 Comprehensive Plan includes elements focused on the following policy areas: land use, natural resources, open space and outdoor recreation, cultural and historical resources, housing, economic development, community services and facilities, energy and renewable energy, and natural hazards and climate change.

As historic background, a previous draft of the Comprehensive Plan Update was initially prepared by BETA Group and sent to the Division of Statewide Planning for advisory review in Fall of 2023. The State identified several deficiencies throughout the Plan, with a particular focus on the lack of affordable housing strategies. In 2024, Town staff and BETA Group drafted revisions to address deficiencies in an attempt fill in those gaps, however the DRAFT Plan still needed adequate "buy in" from local stakeholders on affordable housing strategies.

In April 2025, Planning Staff convened an ad-hoc group of community stakeholders and housing policy experts to review the draft Housing Chapter and offer comments. Staff also used existing technical assistance funds (at no cost to the Town) to support expert consultant review of the DRAFT Housing Chapter to target specific improvements. In November 2025, the Town obtained additional free technical assistance through RI Housing's Municipal Technical Assistance Program (MTAP) to fund a more significant re-write of the Housing Chapter to better address the strategic goals and objectives and protect community character and ensure viability. The Town's consultant anticipates that the revised Housing Chapter will be finalized in the fall of 2026.

II. Local and State Adoption Process

The Town is now prepared to locally adopt the DRAFT 2026 Comprehensive Plan, starting with the Planning Commission's review and recommendation. The local adoption process is further outlined in **RIGL § 45-22.2-8**, which tasks the Planning Commission with preparing the draft comprehensive plan, including the implementation program. The Commission is also tasked with gathering oral or written feedback from citizens, conducting a minimum of one public hearing, and submit recommendations to the municipal legislative body (the Town Council) regarding the adoption of the plan. Following the Planning Commission's recommendation, the Coventry Town Council will hold a separate public hearing and vote on the adoption of the DRAFT 2026 Comprehensive Plan Update. At this time, no Town Council hearings on this matter have been scheduled.

The Division of Statewide Planning is the agency responsible for the state-level review and adoption of this document. The state adoption process is further detailed in RIGL § 45-22.2-9. Prior to the initiation of this current local adoption process, the Division of Statewide Planning informed Planning staff that most components of the DRAFT 2026 Plan remain generally consistent with state Comprehensive Planning standards since their 2023 review. However, the Division noted deficiencies within the Housing and Economic Development chapters. The deficiencies in the Housing Chapter, in addition to any comments received as part of this local adoption process, will be addressed in the revised version.

The current DRAFT Economic Development Chapter was considered deficient primarily because it contained obsolete data. Staff updated the tables, charts, and graphs with more recent (2024 or newer) data, where available. The revised chapter was submitted to the Division of Statewide Planning for a 20-day advisory review on March 16, 2026. Statewide Planning expects to return comments to the Town by April 6, 2026. Planning staff recommend a continuance of the Planning Commission's review of the proposed Comprehensive Plan Update to allow time to review and address those comments, as well as those discussed in section IV below.

III. Comprehensive Planning Goals

The Planning Commission should consider if this DRAFT 2026 Comprehensive Community Plan Update aligns with the goals of the **Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Act**, RIGL 45-22.2-3(c). Planning staff has not prepared findings at this time, per the staff recommendation to continue below, but the Comprehensive Planning goals are provided below for ease of reference.

RIGL § 45-22.2-3(c) Goals. *The general assembly hereby establishes a series of goals to provide overall direction and consistency for state and municipal agencies in the comprehensive planning process established by this chapter. The goals have equal priority and are numbered for reference only.*

(1) To promote orderly growth and development that recognizes the natural characteristics of the land, its suitability for use, the availability of existing and proposed public and/or private services and facilities, and is consistent with available resources and the need to protect public health, including drinking water supply, drinking water safety, and environmental quality.

(2) To promote an economic climate which increases quality job opportunities and overall economic well being of each municipality and the state.

(3) To promote the production and rehabilitation of year-round housing and to preserve government subsidized housing for persons and families of low and moderate income in a manner that: considers local, regional, and statewide needs; housing that achieves a balance of housing choices, for all income levels and age groups; recognizes the affordability of housing as the responsibility of each municipality and the state; takes into account growth management and the need to phase and pace development in areas of rapid growth; and facilitates economic growth in the state.

(4) To promote the protection of the natural, historic and cultural resources of each municipality and the state.

(5) To promote the preservation of the open space and recreational resources of each municipality and the state.

(6) To provide for the use of performance-based standards for development and to encourage the use of innovative development regulations and techniques that promote the development of land

suitable for development while protecting our natural, cultural, historical, and recreational resources, and achieving a balanced pattern of land uses.

(7) To promote consistency of state actions and programs with municipal comprehensive plans, and provide for review procedures to ensure that state goals and policies are reflected in municipal comprehensive plans and state guide plans.

(8) To ensure that adequate and uniform data are available to municipal and state government as the basis for comprehensive planning and land use regulation.

(9) To ensure that municipal land use regulations and decisions are consistent with the comprehensive plan of the municipality, and to ensure state land use regulations and decisions are consistent with state guide plans.

(10) To encourage the involvement of all citizens in the formulation, review, and adoption, or amendment of the comprehensive plan.

IV. Outstanding Comments on the DRAFT Comprehensive Plan Update

Over the past month, Planning staff sought feedback on the DRAFT 2026 Comprehensive Plan Update from various Town departments, the ad-hoc Comprehensive Plan advisory task force, Town boards and commissions, expert local stakeholders, and members of the general public. These comments are detailed according to each chapter of the DRAFT Plan, below:

Volume I and Implementation Plan

One member of the ad-hoc Comprehensive Plan advisory task force provided detailed comments on both Volumes I and II of the DRAFT Plan, many of which recommended minor formatting changes. This member recommended that the Planning Commission add the following implementation actions:

- Create a program to rehabilitate dilapidated houses and register them as LMI units.
- Prevent additional stormwater runoff from paved driveways and driveways that have downspout outputs directed towards the streets.
- Require all non-hydranted subdivisions to have 30,000-gallon cistern to meet firefighting water needs and reduce Insurance Services Office (ISO) rating.

A member of the Planning Commission suggested that Nooseneck Hill Road be added as a future commercial base for the town and pointed out a potential Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program will be met with opposition.

Another member of the Planning Commission also had detailed comments on the Implementation Plan and offered the following thoughts and suggestions:

- Staff could develop vision statements as part of its effort to revitalize historic village centers.
- Requirements for spring and fall plantings could be integrated into the Subdivision Regulations and Zoning Ordinance (as opposed to conditions of approval).
- Land Trust and Conservation Commission members could provide written comments to the Planning Commission upon request, rather than be added to the Technical Review Committee.
- The Historic Preservation Commission could be charged with visioning and implementing cultural activities, as opposed to a new cultural council.

- Multi-family housing could be allowed in areas with public water and sewer, potentially with specific dimensional and screening requirements.

The Conservation Commission provided comments, dated March 18, 2026, addressing implementation actions related to natural resources, which recommended that the Town:

- Act upon the content within the DRAFT Plan that suggests the Conservation Commission and Land Trust members be added to the Technical Review Committee (STAFF NOTE: the Planning Commission does not have the authority to add or remove TRC members, however, the Planning Commission can review this comment as it relates to Comprehensive Plan content).
- Explore stronger stormwater management standards and regulations.
- Protect surface water including abatement for aquatic invasive species.
- Diversify forest woodlands with non-invasive species.
- Include Lake Management Plans and examine development effects on water quality.
- Ensure that developers review the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act protocol.

Moreover, the Commission offered comments on actions related to open space and outdoor recreation – they suggested that the redevelopment of Johnson’s Pond should include access to nearby school athletic fields via bike and walking trails, the Town should explore the possibility of an identified bike lane, and the Town should provide for dam inspection and management.

Chapter 1 – Land Use

A member of the Planning Commission offered several comments on Chapter 1. The comments suggested that the Town avoid re-zoning of RR-2 parcels within the Urban Services Boundary (USB) as R-20, and instead focus on public sewer expansion or create an RR-1 zone as a bridge between RR-2 and R-20. He expressed support for open space and conservation restrictions.

Chapter 2 – Natural Resources

One member of the ad-hoc Comprehensive Plan advisory task force recommended that Princess Pine and Lady Slippers be added to Table 2.4, Rare Plant Occurrences in Coventry. A member of the Planning Commission commented that the Town should consider increasing the 40% open space requirement for residential cluster developments to 50% to decrease density, preserve open space, and create buffers.

Chapter 3 – Open Space and Outdoor Recreation

The Director of Parks and Recreation forwarded comments on Chapter 3 in a memo dated March 10, 2026. This memo offered straightforward edits and post-pandemic updates to data and/or information on Town parks, athletic fields, and playgrounds, and other recreation services.

Chapter 4 – Historical and Cultural Resources

The Coventry Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) provided several comments on Chapter 4, via letter dated March 6, 2026. These comments were generally straightforward – the HPC asked for staff

to add the original Town Clerk's office to the list of historic buildings, offered minor formatting edits, and provided additional context on the Town's historic cemeteries.

Chapter 5 – Housing

Planning staff met with an ad-hoc group of local stakeholders and housing policy experts, who provided comments and feedback on housing policies. The executive director of the Coventry Housing Authority (CHA) suggested that the Comprehensive Plan address the rehabilitation of older, mill-type housing and funding an affordable housing trust. The CHA director followed up with a comment letter dated March 18, 2026, addressing the Comprehensive Plan's approach to affordable housing. Furthermore, the current President and CEO of Crossroads RI provided a comment letter dated March 19, 2026 addressing the DRAFT Housing Chapter and specific implementation actions addressing housing.

Chapter 6 – Economic Development

The pending updates to Chapter 6 are discussed in further detail above. The revised Economic Development Chapter will be provided to the Planning Commission at the next meeting, following the State's review of this document.

Chapter 7 – Community Services and Facilities

Planning staff has received comments on Chapter 7 from multiple Town departments. As of this staff report, the Town Engineer, Police Chief, Library Director, Central Coventry Fire Chief, and Director of Human Services have provided comments and suggested edits on the relevant sections of the chapter, which were straightforward and generally consistent with the needs and daily operations of those departments. As a next step, Planning staff will seek additional comments from the Department of Public Works and the Superintendent of Coventry Public Schools. A Planning Commission member also offered edits to Chapter 7 regarding the consolidation of the current Fire District into one municipal fire department.

Chapter 8 – Energy and Renewable Energy

Few comments have been received on Chapter 8. A member of the Planning Commission expressed concerns about expanding wind turbines in town and ground-mounted solar arrays, especially in residential zones.

Chapter 9 – Transportation

The Town Engineer reviewed Chapter 9 and provided comments containing minimal suggested edits. A member of the Planning Commission expressed support for expanding RIPTA bus routes into the unserved portion of Route 3 into West Warwick, up Hopkins Hill Road into the park and ride at I-95, and Centre of New England Boulevard. This member also suggested to add a sentence to explore possibilities of another north/south artery or connection in town, potentially between Airport Road and the end of Industrial Drive to the north.

Chapter 10 – Natural Hazards and Climate Change

A member of the Planning Commission suggested that the Town explore adding fire cisterns on Town-owned property in Central and Western Coventry and that these cisterns should be designed to collect rainwater and stormwater. Planning staff is also working to update Chapter 10 to better align with and reflect the Town's Hazard Mitigation Plan from 2025.

General Comments

One member of the ad-hoc Comprehensive Plan advisory task force, expressed concerns about housing development growth in Town Council District 4 and its environmental impacts on Lake Tiogue and other natural resources. It should be noted that much of the available public water and sewer is concentrated in this area of town.

Another member of the advisory task force offered several minor formatting edits on Volumes I and II of the DRAFT Plan and suggested that the Town borrow some goals and land use descriptions from the 1999 Comprehensive Plan. That member also recommended the following:

- An increase from 5-acre zoning to 10-acre zoning.
- An update to residential cluster development regulations to subtract all non-usable land, including wetlands, wetland buffer zones, steep slopes, and exposed ledge.
- A requirement for buffer zones between incompatible land uses to provide mitigation for noise, light, and litter, as well as people and car barriers.
- A requirement for various roadway improvements to make increased use compatible with neighborhood and town facilities.
- A requirement for land use projects to fund traffic and engineering studies using service providers chosen by the Town to address various issues.

The member also recommended that the borders of the Urban Land Use map be compared to the KCWA service area, expansion into other areas bordering water bodies, expansion into limited space residential areas, and review of roadways.

In response to that member's comments, Planning staff notes that the Subdivision Regulations presently require residential cluster developments to subtract all land unsuitable for development per Article IV, Section A.3. The definition of 'land unsuitable for development' in Article III, Section B.1 includes wetlands and perimeter wetlands, land within Zone A on the flood map, street allowance, public and private easements, and steep slopes. Additionally, both staff and the Planning Commission have required most subdivisions and developments to install buffers, construct roadway improvements, and perform traffic and engineering reviews.

One member of the Coventry Land Trust submitted comments in which she urged the Town to examine an increase in the minimum lot area for large parcels in Western Coventry. The member also proposed that Coventry encourage solar farms to be placed on brownfields, rooftops, and razed lots to avoid deforestation.

Next Steps

Planning staff defer to the Planning Commission's feedback and guidance on the specific edits and the conceptual comments that should be incorporated into the 2026 Comprehensive Plan Update moving forward. Staff will take the feedback gathered from the Planning Commission at the March 25, 2026

meeting and assist with drafting edits to the 2026 Plan prior to the April 22, 2026 Planning Commission meeting. Staff will also prepare specific Comprehensive Plan findings in accordance with state law at the April 22, 2026 meeting.

III. Planning Department Recommendation

Planning staff recommends that the Planning Commission continue its consideration of the proposed DRAFT 2026 Comprehensive Community Plan Update to the **April 22, 2026** meeting, to allow for additional Commission feedback on the specific desired changes to the 2026 Plan.