

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: 2026 RURAL POLICY PLAN



A STATEWIDE AGENDA FOR RURAL MASSACHUSETTS

Rural Massachusetts is essential to the prosperity, resilience, and quality of life throughout the Commonwealth. Its communities sustain farms, forests, fisheries, small businesses, and distinctive village centers. They protect drinking water supplies, provide opportunities for outdoor recreation, and steward natural resources that benefit residents across the state.

The **2026 Rural Policy Plan**, developed by the Massachusetts Rural Policy Advisory Commission (RPAC), sets an agenda for strengthening rural communities and ensuring their residents have equitable access to services, opportunities, and public investment. Building on the 2019 Plan, it recognizes progress while identifying persistent inequities and the actions needed to address them. Its central message is straightforward: state policies should account for rural conditions, and rural communities should have the capacity to put those policies into practice.

THERE IS MORE THAN ONE “RURAL” IN THE COMMONWEALTH

Under the statutory definition used by RPAC, rural municipalities have fewer than 500 residents per square mile and/or fewer than 7,000 residents. Based on the 2020 U.S. Census, Massachusetts has 181 rural

municipalities encompassing 60% of the state’s land area and 13% of its population.

These communities are not all the same. The Plan uses three descriptive typologies—**Suburbs and Bedroom Communities**, **Areas of Economic Distress**, and **Concentrations of Second Homes**—to understand how trends affect different rural places. Some communities face development pressure and long commutes; others contend with population loss, lower incomes, and geographic isolation; still other rural communities experience housing markets and infrastructure demands shaped by tourism and second-home ownership. Some municipalities share characteristics of more than one typology.

Across these differences, recurring structural challenges constrain rural opportunity. Small tax bases and limited staffing make it difficult to sustain municipal services, maintain infrastructure, and manage complex projects. Long distances increase the cost of transportation and service delivery. Aging populations, workforce shortages, housing constraints, and declining school enrollment place additional pressure on communities. Funding formulas, eligibility rules, and competitive grants often fail to account for these conditions or the local significance of smaller investments.

PROGRESS TO BUILD ON

Since 2019, rural advocacy and collaboration with state partners have produced meaningful gains. The Commonwealth established a Director of Rural Affairs and a Rural Development Fund within the Executive Office of Economic Development, substantially expanded broadband access, and increased support for rural transportation. Shared public health services have strengthened local capacity, while new attention to rural schools, outdoor recreation, and statewide land-use planning has elevated issues central to rural communities.

These gains demonstrate the value of a sustained rural policy agenda, but they have not resolved underlying inequities. Some investments remain dependent on annual appropriations, temporary federal resources, or programs that are not permanently secured. Rural water and wastewater needs remain substantially unmet; many communities still lack the staff, technical expertise, and financial resources necessary to benefit fully from state initiatives. The next phase must make progress durable while addressing the structural barriers that continue to limit rural opportunity.

PATHWAYS FOR ACTION

The Plan addresses nine interconnected policy areas: economic development and workforce; education; housing; land use; municipal sustainability; public health; technology, broadband, and digital resilience; transportation; and water and wastewater. Together, their recommendations advance five pathways for action.

1. Align state policy and investment with rural conditions.

Rural equity requires more than smaller versions of programs designed for metropolitan areas. State funding, regulations, and administrative practices should recognize low population density, geographic distance, limited staffing, and the higher per-unit costs of maintaining essential services.

The Plan calls for the Commonwealth to:

- Establish and permanently resource a rural policy coordination function with authority to convene agencies, assess rural impacts, and resolve cross-secretariat barriers.
- Revise funding formulas, eligibility criteria, match requirements, and grant processes that disadvantage rural communities or overlook locally significant projects.
- Provide predictable, multi-year funding and sustained regional technical assistance so communities can develop projects and implement state priorities.
- Coordinate before programs are launched to reduce reliance on small municipalities identifying and resolving conflicting requirements after the fact.

2. Sustain schools, local government, and essential services.

Strong schools, functioning local governments, and accessible health and emergency services are foundational to rural viability. Declining enrollment does not eliminate schools' fixed costs, and regional service delivery does not automatically reduce municipal expenses. Rural communities need financing and staffing models that reflect the actual cost of providing reliable services.

The Plan calls for the Commonwealth to:

- Increase Rural School Aid to \$68.5 million, with annual inflation adjustments, while pursuing Chapter 70 and foundation formula reforms that recognize rural costs and financial conditions.



- Strengthen municipal revenues, workforce training, and support for shared services, including multi-year assistance for planning and implementing regional models.
- Sustain public health improvements through predictable state investment in State Action for Public Health Excellence (SAPHE) 2.0, including the Public Health Excellence program, and use the Rural Health Transformation Program to strengthen access to essential care.
- Support sustainable rural emergency response and address transportation barriers that prevent residents from reaching medical services.

3. Make housing and infrastructure feasible at rural scale.

Rural housing and infrastructure projects can be too small to compete successfully for existing funding yet too costly for local communities to undertake alone. Limited water and wastewater capacity, aging buildings, transportation gaps, and uneven digital access further constrain development and daily life.

The Plan calls for the Commonwealth to:

- Tailor housing subsidies, financing, rehabilitation tools, and regulatory requirements to small-scale

development, weaker markets, and the year-round housing needs of seasonal communities.

- Establish dedicated rural water, wastewater, and stormwater infrastructure funding, and support small and decentralized systems while maintaining public health and environmental protections.
- Permanently fund Chapter 90 at no less than \$300 million annually, index future allocations to inflation, and codify the distribution of funding above \$200 million by road miles.
- Sustain unpaved road, bridge, and culvert investments; expand flexible transit and multimodal connections; and simplify project development and permitting.
- Close remaining broadband gaps and strengthen affordability, mobile coverage, digital skills, cybersecurity, and municipal information technology capacity.

4. Strengthen rural economies and workforce development.

Rural economic development depends on the viability of small businesses, working-land enterprises, village centers, and local workforce systems. Investments must recognize modest project scale, dispersed demand, and the barriers that prevent residents from accessing jobs and training.

The Plan calls for the Commonwealth to:

- Expand flexible capital, technical assistance, and sustained place-based investment for small and micro businesses, village centers, and community-driven development.

- Stabilize rural MassHire services and build workforce partnerships among employers, educational institutions, regional organizations, and community-based providers.
- Expand apprenticeships, paid work-based learning, and local career pathways, including pathways into health care, skilled trades, education, and municipal services.
- Address childcare, housing, transportation, technology, and other practical barriers to workforce participation.

5. Support rural stewardship and climate resilience.

Rural communities provide land and ecosystem services that support statewide water security, food production, conservation, and climate goals. These responsibilities should be balanced with local fiscal sustainability, economic opportunity, and the capacity to manage infrastructure and public safety demands.

The Plan calls for the Commonwealth to:

- Modernize Payments in Lieu of Taxes and related reimbursement approaches to better recognize the effects of state-owned land and rural stewardship responsibilities.
- Ensure meaningful rural participation in the Massachusetts Integrated Land Use Strategy and related decisions about housing, conservation, clean energy, and development.
- Provide planning, technical, and legal support so communities can evaluate and manage large-scale energy and data-center proposals.





- Invest in watershed-scale resilience, resilient roads and water systems, farm and forest adaptation, and outdoor recreation infrastructure that benefits local communities.

A FRAMEWORK FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The 2026 Plan was developed through review of the 2019 recommendations, consultation with state and local stakeholders, and 18 public feedback sessions. Recommendations were included only if they address uniquely rural conditions or statewide issues that are amplified in rural settings. Two themes connect the agenda: rural equity—fair access to services, opportunities, and resources—and capacity—the ability to plan, staff, finance, and implement needed work.

Recommendations identify four types of action: **policy, funding, programming, and legislative**. This framework helps agencies, legislators, and regional and local partners identify where they can act.

Implementation must also recognize the relationships among chapters: housing and workforce strategies depend on transportation and infrastructure; school finance affects municipal sustainability; and climate resilience connects land, roads, water systems, and emergency response.

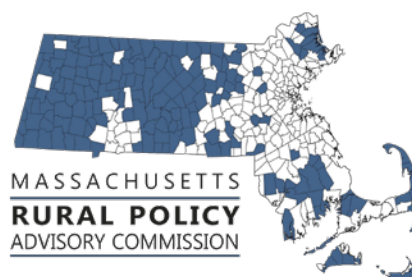
MOVING THE AGENDA FORWARD

The Plan provides a shared basis for state investment, legislative action, agency program design, and regional implementation. The Governor and state agencies should use it to coordinate rural priorities and assess the rural effects of policies and programs. Legislators should use it to guide financing and

statutory reforms. Regional organizations and municipalities should use it to develop partnerships, projects, and advocacy. RPAC should track progress, identify unresolved barriers, and keep attention focused on implementation.

This level of coordination cannot depend solely on informal relationships among agencies or on rural municipalities identifying and resolving conflicts after programs are launched. Ideally, the Commonwealth would have a designated rural-policy coordination lead, authorized to bring secretariats together around shared rural priorities, align implementation timelines and funding opportunities, and identify where one agency's policy may unintentionally undermine progress in another area.

A stronger rural Massachusetts requires sustained commitments, practical implementation support, and coordinated action. By aligning public investment with rural conditions and strengthening the institutions that serve rural residents, the Commonwealth can advance opportunity, resilience, and quality of life across Massachusetts.



<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/rural-policy-advisory-commission-rpac>