

13.0 LAND USE

13.1 Introduction

The Land Use Chapter's purpose is to help shape a plan for land use in the City over the next 20 years. This involves updating current, and developing new, land use controls and regulations designed to implement this plan. This section outlines the current status of land use in Cranston while also providing insight into future development trends and defining goals and policies for long-term prosperity.

As defined by the State Planning Council's Guidance Handbook #13, Planning for Land Use, "planning for land use implies creating a balance of uses that is appropriate for achieving the community's goals and is reflective of the natural characteristics of the land, its suitability for use, and the availability of existing and proposed public and/or private services and facilities. Land use planning must be consistent with available resources and the need to protect public health, safety, and welfare" (Division of Statewide Planning, 2021).

Cranston's developed land uses consist of residential, commercial, industrial, developed recreation, institutional, and transportation areas. Undeveloped areas include agriculture, utilities, vacant land, cemeteries, forested lands, water, wetlands, and barren land which includes beaches, mines, quarries and gravel pits. This Chapter is the centerpiece of comprehensive planning, connecting all other elements of the plan, and serving as a guide for thoughtful municipal decision-making on how to best manage land in the Town.

13.2 Existing Conditions

The first step in establishing a vision for the City of Cranston involves understanding current conditions. This section includes an overview of the land use existing conditions, and current zoning, along with a discussion of recent development trends. Many of the primary land use concerns were discussed during public workshops with City residents.

Cranston blends the suburban feel of a small town with the accessibility and demands of a large metropolis. Its proximity to Providence makes it both a bedroom community for commuters as well as a destination in its own right. Various land uses across the City ensure that residents and visitors have all their needs within short distances. Western Cranston is primarily residential and undeveloped while commercial districts and industrial sites are centrally located and to the east.

13.2.1 Existing Land Use

The City's existing land area of 18,494 acres consists of a variety of uses. Table 13-1, *Existing Land Use*, provides a breakdown of land use and landcover based on Rhode Island Geographic Information System (RIGIS) data. This dataset documents land area covered by residential, commercial, industrial, transportation, utilities, and communication, developed recreation, vacant lands, cemeteries, institutional, agricultural lands, forested lands, barren land, water, wetlands, and ground-mounted solar energy systems. The top seven land uses in the City consist of residential land (40%), forested (29%), commercial (6%), agriculture (5%), institutional (4%), industrial (4%), and roadways and utilities (3%) (RIGIS, 2020). Over the past decade, the City has experienced a significant loss of forests, agriculture, and vacant lands with approximately 8% loss in agriculture, just under 4% of forests, and 6% loss in vacant lands, respectively. However, the City has added

118 acres of ground-mounted solar to the land area. Cranston has also gained 141 acres of residential land. Table 13-1, *Existing Land Use*, illustrates the distribution of land uses across Cranston with the majority of commercial uses clustered along Reservoir Avenue and industrial sites to the southeastern and northwestern portions of the City. Residential uses continue to encroach upon agriculture and open space to the west of I-295 till the Scituate border. Additional information can be found in Figure 13-1, *Existing Land Use*.

Land Use	RIGIS LULC Code 2020	RIGIS LULC Description (2020)	City/Town Land Area (Acres)	% of City/Town Land Area
Residential	111	High Density Residential (<1/8 acre lots)	2,556	14%
	112	Medium High Density (1/4 to 1/8 acre lots)	2,498	14%
	113	Medium Density Residential (1 to 1/4 acre lots)	2,099	11%
	114	Medium Low Density Residential (1 to 2 acre lots)	166	<1%
	115	Low Density Residential (>2 acre lots)	90	<1%
Total Residential			7,409	40%
Commercial	120	Commercial (sale of products and services)	854	5%
	152	Commercial/Industrial Mixed	187	1%
Total Commercial			1,041	6%
Industrial	130	Industrial (manufacturing, design, assembly, etc.)	641	3%
	144	Water and Sewage Treatment	25	<1%
Total Industrial			666	4%
Roads and Utilities	143	Railroads	22	<1%
	144	Roads (divided highways >200' plus related facilities)	445	2%
	146	Power Lines (100' or more width)	115	<1%
	147	Other Transportation (terminals, docks, etc.)	41	<1%
Total Roads and Utilities			623	3%
Vacant land (open land with no evident purpose) and urban open (transitional land use areas)	162	Vacant Land	75	<1%
	750	Transitional Areas (urban open)	118	<1%
Total Vacant Land and Urban Open			193	1%
Undeveloped Open Land	145	Waste Disposal (landfills, junkyards, etc.)	74	<1%
	163	Cemeteries	193	1%
	740	Mines, Quarries and Gravel Pits	183	<1%
Total Undeveloped Open Land			450	2%
Institutional/Public Other	170	Institutional (schools, hospitals, churches, etc.)	669	4%
	Total Institutional/Public Other			669
Agriculture	210	Pasture (agricultural not suitable for tillage)	213	1%
	220	Cropland (tillable)	470	3%

Land Use	RIGIS LULC Code 2020	RIGIS LULC Description (2020)	City/Town Land Area (Acres)	% of City/Town Land Area
	230	Orchards, Groves, Nurseries	122	1%
	250	Idle Agriculture (abandoned fields and orchards)	92	<1%
	Total Agriculture		897	5%
Forested and Vegetated Areas	300	Brushland (shrub and brush areas, reforestation)	190	1%
	410	Deciduous Forest (>80% hardwood)	4,335	23%
	420	Softwood Forest (>80 softwood)	116	<1%
	430	Mixed Forest	805	4%
Total Forested and Vegetated		5,446	29%	
Water	500	Water	369	2%
	Total Water		369	2%
Developed Recreation	161	Developed Recreation (all recreation)	545	3%
	Total Developed Recreation		545	3%
Wetlands	600	Wetland	68	<1%
	Total Wetland		68	<1%
Ground-Mounted Solar Energy Systems	148	Ground-Mounted Solar Energy Systems	118	<1%
	Total Ground-Mounted Solar Energy Systems		118	<1%
TOTAL			18,494	100%

Source: City of Cranston, RIGIS, 2024

Land use changes that occurred between 2011 and 2020 are summarized in Table 13-2, *Land Use Over Time*. Cranston continues to expand its residential options to account for economic growth within the City as well as commuters who work in Providence. According to the Rhode Island Statewide Planning program, a municipality is classified as urban if it has a population density of at least 2,500 persons per square mile and 50% or more of the land area is classified as developed (RI Statewide Planning Program, 1999). The City has seen new development on land that was once occupied by agriculture uses. Conversion of agricultural land to urban and highly developed land use has been ongoing over the past two decades (Farms Under Threat, 2001-2016). The American Farmland Trust (AFT) has analyzed land development under a business-as-usual scenario and estimates that Rhode Island would lose about 8,100 acres of farmland between now and 2040 due to new development (RI Food Policy Council, 2017).

Land Use	2011 (acres)	2021 (acres)	Change 2011-2021 (acres)	% Change Over Time
Agriculture	975	897	-78	-8%
Commercial	1,024	1,041	17	2%
Developed Recreation (all recreation)	538	545	7	1%
Industrial (manufacturing, design, assembly, etc.)	664	666	2	<1%
Institutional (schools, hospitals, churches, etc.)	666	669	3	<1%
Forest	5,672	5,446	-226	-4%

Land Use	2011 (acres)	2021 (acres)	Change 2011-2021 (acres)	% Change Over Time
Residential	7,268	7,409	141	2%
Roads and Utilities	613	623	10	2%
Undeveloped Open Land	436	450	14	3%
Vacant Land and Transitional Areas	206	193	-13	-6%
Water	366	369	3	<1%
Wetlands	67	68	1	1%
Ground-Mounted Solar Energy Systems	0	118	118	N/A
TOTAL	18,495	18,494	-1	-1%

Source: City of Cranston, RIGIS, 2024

The physical landscape of Cranston provides a wide variety of experiences for residents and visitors including John L. Curran State Park, Furnace Brook Wetland, William J. Flanders Park, Meshanticut State Park, Pawtuxet Oboes Park, and several ponds throughout the area. Areas west of I-295 are particularly important for the City's developed recreational areas and protected open space. Additional information on recreational services is detailed in Chapter 10, *Open Space and Recreation*.

Land uses should continue to follow central policies from the 2010 Comprehensive plan, including expanding "smart growth" policies, maintaining links between land uses, and retaining the agricultural and open space landscapes (City of Cranston, 2010). The City's existing industrial and commercial areas consist of a mix of manufacturing and retail businesses concentrated along Reservoir Avenue, Park Avenue, I-95, State Highway 37 West, State Highway 2 South and New London Avenue. The industrial uses have long played an essential part of the Town. Today, industrial parks are located primarily in the southern and eastern part of Cranston, but there are scattered manufacturing zones to the north. A large quarry, owned by P.J. Keating Company, is centrally located and comprises roughly 183 acres (P.J. Keating, 2024).

The Town should carefully monitor future development near natural resources and open space areas. Increased development can create more impervious surface, which can contribute to increased stormwater runoff and affect wildlife habitat. Adverse impacts of development on natural resources are further detailed in Chapter 4, *Natural Resources*. Land development can also lead to loss of green cover and formation of heat islands. Heat islands are structures and impervious cover such as buildings and roads that absorb and re-emit the sun's heat (EPA, 2023). As a result, these surfaces have higher temperatures than natural landscapes such as forests. Impacts of development on climate are further detailed in Chapter 12, *Natural Hazards and Climate Change*.

The City has promoted low-impact development and sustainable standards since the 2010 Comprehensive Plan. Smart growth districts and mixed-use zones, as further discussed in Section 13.2.2, Existing Zoning Districts, have been implemented to promote sustainable development in high density areas. However, the City has also experienced disputes over solar development. The City enacted several solar farm regulations to manage growth of these areas and protect existing land uses. Cranston's largest solar farm to the east of Lippitt Avenue with the West Warwick border is located along Hope Road at roughly 60 acres (City of Cranston, 2019). As discussed in Section 13.5., Challenges & Opportunities, solar arrays have become a point of contention.

13.2.2 Existing Zoning Districts

The allowable use of land is determined by the designation of a zoning district, which is established in the zoning ordinance. The zoning ordinance is responsible for establishing the zoning districts in the City and determining which uses are allowed in each district.

Approximately 15,620 of Cranston's total land area is located within one of 15 major zoning categories, which are outlined in Table 13-3, *Land Area by Zoning Category*. Figure 13-2, *Zoning*, visually depicts the location of each zone. This map visually illustrates that nearly all of western Cranston is A-80 residential zoning, which contains the largest minimum lot sizes of any residential zoning district, per Table 13-4, *Minimum Lot Size by Zoning District*. Several additional zones, including the Mixed-Use Planned Districts and Educational Institution (EI) Zones, comprise an additional 120 acres and 22 acres, respectively. The map also depicts two future village centers to the west of I-295 where the planned centers overlap with A-80, A-12, M-2, and MPD zones. These zones include additional requirements and limitations that are not applicable to the traditional zoning categories.

Below are descriptions of each zoning district with their intended primary uses. Please refer to Figure 13-2 for any relevant geographic information or the Cranston Zoning Ordinance for additional information on each district.

Residential (A-80, A-20, A-12, A-8, A-6)

Residential districts that primarily encompass residential dwellings on lots ranging from low- to moderate- density of 20,000 square feet to 4,000 square feet. The only types of multi-family homes allowed in these districts are community residences.

Residential (B-1, B-2)

Residential districts that promote moderate- to high- density single-family and multi-family dwellings on 4,000 and 6,000 square foot lots, respectively. Residential B-1 and B-2 are designed for multi-family homes.

Commercial (C-1)

Commercial C-1 is the major office business district. C-1 is centrally located around Reservoir Avenue and Park Avenue, as well as Broad Street. Single-family residential uses are also permitted in these areas. A major cluster is found along Cranston Street in the northeast portion of the City.

Commercial (C-2)

Commercial C-2 is the neighborhood business district and can be found scattered throughout eastern Cranston.

Commercial (C-3)

Commercial C-3 is comprised of general business, which does not include any provisions for allowing residential housing, except residences above a first story business use.

Commercial (C-4)

Commercial C-4 is primarily used for highway business and is located along I-295, State Highways 2, 10, and 37, and along Reservoir and Park Avenues, as well as a small cluster bordering Scituate in the southwestern corner of the City.

Commercial (C-5)

Commercial C-5 is a transitional point between heavy commercial and industrial uses. Clusters of C-5 are found throughout Cranston, but they are often between a commercial and an industrial district.

Industrial (M-1 and M-2)

Industrial M-1 are made up of restricted industry while M-2 is considered general industry. There are only slight differences between these two districts, including whether open space is permitted and the greater amount of space that M-2 covers.

Open Space (S-1)

Open Space S-1 districts are dedicated to preserving open space and natural character of its jurisdiction. A large lot of S-1 zoned land is located south of the intersection of New London Avenue and State Highway 37 West. Existing open spaces and protected lands are found throughout Cranston. Additional information on open space and protected resources can be found in Chapter 4, *Natural Resources*, and Chapter 10, *Open Space and Recreation*.

Other Districts

Other districts, including Mixed-Use Planned Districts (MPD) and Educational Institutional (EI), have their own purposes. The Mixed-Use Planned Districts are used for developments that are compatible with local needs and expectations, but do not fit properly into one category and thus must be reviewed as its own district entirely. The EI is another distinct district that has particularly criteria aimed at “continued viability and expansion of higher education institutions” (City of Cranston, 2024). All development in these districts must adhere to strict guidelines.

Zoning District	Acres	Percentage of Total Land Area
Residential or R Zones		
A-80	264	2%
A-20	2,286	15%
A-12	1,616	10%
A-8	1,695	11%
A-6	4,728	30%
B-1	906	6%
B-2	312	2%
Residential Total	11,807	76%
Commercial or C Zones		
C-1	82	<1%
C-2	130	<1%
C-3	130	<1%
C-4	217	1%
C-5	203	1%
Commercial Total	762	4%
Industrial/Manufacturing or M Zones		
M-1	225	2%

M-2	1,302	8%
Industrial/Manufacturing Total	1,527	10%
Open Space or S Zones		
S-1	1,524	10%
Open Space Total	1,524	10%
Other Districts		
MPD	120	<1%
Educational Institution (EI)	22	<1%
Other Districts Total	142	<1%
TOTAL	15,620	100%

Source: City of Cranston, RIGIS, 2024

The zoning ordinance also establishes the dimensional requirements for lot sizes within the Town. The minimum lot size, or area within the boundaries of a lot that excludes any street right-of-way, is included in Table 13-4, *Minimum Lot Size by Zoning District*.

Zoning District	Single-Family Dwellings Minimum Lot Area (sq. ft.)	Single-Family Dwellings Minimum Lot Frontage (feet)	Two-Family Dwellings Minimum Lot Area (sq. ft.)	Two-Family Dwellings Minimum Lot Frontage (feet)
A-80	20,000	125	60,000	150
A-20	10,000	80	15,000	100
A-12	6,000	60	9,000	80
A-8	4,000	50	6,000	60
A-6	4,000	50	Not Allowed	Not Allowed
B-1	4,000	50	6,000	60
B-2	4,000	50	6,000	60

Source: City of Cranston, 2024

13.2.3 Development and Demographic Trends

Long-term development and demographic trends are expected to reflect the patterns depicted throughout the past few decades. A shift from agriculture, large lot sizes, and automobile-focused development patterns towards mixed-use, transit-oriented development, and smart growth are expected to continue taking hold. Western Cranston has experienced additional development in areas that have historically been open space and agriculture. These trends are expected to continue, especially given the State's recent push to encourage development through various legislative changes.

Western Cranston is at risk of experiencing higher rates of development due to the potential for overcrowding to the east. However, smart growth strategies may play a role in slowing down this trend. "Smart Growth" can be defined in several ways, but for the purposes of this Chapter, the phrase refers to five primary factors:

1. Promoting development in already built areas
2. Emphasizing a mix of uses

3. Reducing development of open space
4. Supporting transit improvements and transit-oriented development
5. Promoting land use practices that reduce sprawl and improve the quality of neighborhoods and village centers.

Smart Growth Development in Cranston

A long-held interest of the City has been to implement smart growth policies to balance the importance of development, open space, and aesthetics. Promoting mixed-use development in heavily built sections of Cranston is integral to village development and open space protection in western portions of the City where encroaching housing is a concern among local residents. The 2010 Plan proposed three types of mixed-used planned development districts, ranging among low, medium, and high intensity. Candidates for this development included the Elmwood/Wellington Avenues area in preparation for future rail service, the intersection of Phenix Avenue and Route 37, the intersection of Pippin Orchard Road and Scituate Avenue, and the Cranston Printworks area.

13.3 Future Land Use

Land uses are expected to remain similar in eastern portions of the City since these areas are already heavily developed. As shown in the Figure 13-3, *Future Land Use*, eastern Cranston is primarily comprised of Sewered Urban Development, or existing developed areas with sewer systems in place. However, western Cranston is in a state of flux. Portions of this area considered conservation land or open space while others are non-urban developed; others are also considered sewered urban development.

Eastern Cranston has little room for development, but can undertake infill, adaptive reuse, mixed-use, and redevelopment proposals. Additional growth in the east is infeasible due to the area having a high density of houses and small lots. However, the hundreds of acres of vacant land that are found throughout this region can be redeveloped as well as existing structures being redeveloped for new, or additional, uses. Western Cranston has room for new development but faces its own constraints due to open space protections and zoning district restrictions.

New village centers around Pippin Orchard Road and Phenix Avenue have been proposed for further consideration. As early as 2000, village center development in western Cranston has been explored through various outreach methods and often met with varying levels of interest. A visual preference survey conducted as part of the *Developing Western Cranston's Proposed Village Center and Public Consensus Through A Visual Preference Survey of 2000* by Thomas Kravits at the University of Rhode Island found that residents viewed Cranston as having high population density despite most areas west of I-295 being comprised of open space, agricultural, or single-family residential uses with 20,000 square foot minimum lot sizes (Kravitz, 2000). Even among new Cranston residents, a similar view of the City remains.

13.4 Current Measures

Cranston enacted a solar ordinance in 2019 that regulated solar energy systems and restricted solar energy systems to specific zoning districts and special requirements. They are allowed as "minor accessories" in all zones, major accessories in C-4, C-5, M-1, M-2, EI, and G, and principal in M-1 and M-2 with varying lot coverage requirements depending on its characterization and location. Additional information on Solar Energy Systems can be found in the Zoning Ordinance.

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Several affordable housing projects and major apartment proposals have been brought to the City Council in recent years. The Cranston-Calvert school was recommended to be rezoned to accommodate the development of a new apartment complex in 2018. This example of “spot zoning” was approved by the state but faced concerns at the City-level. Similar proposals have become common across the City and are expected to continue being developed due to the need for housing, especially affordable housing.

13.5 Challenges and Opportunities

13.5.1 Challenges

Changes to City Character:

Cranston faces unique challenges due to its designation as a City that also maintains a sense of suburban and rural character. As discussed in the 2010 Comprehensive Plan, an ongoing challenge is connecting the disparate land uses within Cranston while preserving the unique qualities of each neighborhood. Balancing open space and farmland preservation with encroaching development is a recurring issue particularly in western Cranston. Recent examples of contentious issues have been the planning of sewer connections and enforcement of conservation subdivision design standards in areas with historically large lot sizes and open space.

Vacant Lands:

Nearly 200 acres of land remain vacant or in transition, despite a 6% decrease between 2011 and 2021. In such a heavily populated region with such a variety of land uses, Cranston is facing a need for protection or development of these parcels, either through easements or infrastructure. In their current state, numerous parcels are not being fully utilized for the kind of interconnected, lively array of village centers the City envisions.

Streetscape Limitations:

The reliance of Cranston on automobile infrastructure has led to car-oriented design, making neighborhoods less accessible and safe. Discussions around accessibility and transit-oriented development have been ongoing since the previous Comprehensive Plan in 2010, but more can be done. Few streetscape improvements and sidewalk maintenance procedures have positively altered the pedestrian-level connectivity for residents.

Environmental Sustainability:

Disputes over sustainability and Cranston’s ability to balance development, open space, affordability, longstanding ways of life, and environmental protection have recently converged to create a significant challenge for Cranston. Not only are there concerns over diminishing natural areas, but solar arrays have also become a particular point of contention. A 2019 solar farm project was met with backlash, which led the City Council to considering a moratorium on proposals on solar projects. This decision indicates potential for future disputes over solar farm proposals.

13.5.2 Opportunities

Diversification of Village Centers:

As early as the 2010 Plan, village and neighborhood centers were identified as potential areas of improvement. Such areas continue to be of primary importance when it comes to improving pedestrian access, reimagining streetscapes, integrating mixed-use development, and reconsidering zoning. Smart growth is one strategy for expanding Cranston’s development capacity while limiting the environmental and aesthetic concerns of such desires. To further develop unique neighborhood character and promote village centers, the City espoused requiring streetscape design and signage standards in 2010 and continues to emphasize the importance. The City has

also considered establishing a historic preservation program for the scenic landscapes and agricultural lands of western Cranston and the Historic Farm Loop.

Solar Farms Lead to a Brighter Future:

Although solar energy remains a contentious issue, there remains significant potential for solar farm development in western Cranston where large portions of land remain undeveloped. Zoning provisions allow for solar energy as permitted-by-right in some districts and can be expanded to other locations in the City. However, ongoing legal challenges and public perception of such developments have made any large-scale projects obsolete.

Development, Redevelopment & Adaptive Reuse:

Several parcels remain available for commercial development, including the former trolley barn site on Cranston Street near Route 10, the Fields Point Army Reserve Center that was in the process of being closed as of the 2010 Comprehensive Plan, and the Pastore Center, among others. The exact timelines for redevelopment and strategies for attracting new businesses merits further study.

Expanded Access for All Modes of Transportation:

Transit-oriented development is also highly feasible and worth consideration given Cranston's proximity to Providence, major thoroughfares, and other large population centers. Should rail service be established in the future in Cranston, the Amtrak rail yard between Elmwood and Wellington Avenues poses a compelling candidate for the location of a station. Greater connectivity for pedestrians to reach places in and around Cranston remains top of mind.

Better connectivity between open spaces provides another opportunity for improving access to Cranston residents. Large swaths of open space could be connected through bike routes and sidewalks lined with signage to promote recreation for residents.

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