



## ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

### CHARLESTOWN COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

A description of Charlestown's tourism and agricultural based economy, and opportunities and recommendations to provide for economic growth in a sustainable and integrated manner.

Map  
**EO-1 Important Farm Soils**

## ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY CHAPTER

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**CHARLESTOWN COMPREHENSIVE PLAN**  
**CHAPTER 9. ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**  
*Planning Commission Final Draft; December 2019*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Economic activity in Charlestown is largely based on tourism. Charlestown's beaches, salt ponds, scenery and open space have attracted tourists since before the 1900's and continue to be the town's greatest economic assets. In 2015, the year round population of the town was 7,773; the Charlestown Chamber of Commerce estimates that the daily summer population of the town swells to more than three times that number. The town's seasonal population is characterized not only by day visitors, but by summer vacationers who rent by the week or month, and by residents of nearby states who own second homes in Charlestown and have become permanent seasonal residents. The typical tourist season runs from Memorial Day through Labor Day and continues moderately into the fall.

The town recognizes that the year round population is limited in its ability to attract and sustain retail development which meets all the needs of its residents, and that most goods and services are procured in adjacent communities. In fact, the availability of commercial opportunities in neighboring communities, and the town's significant distance from the interstate highway (I-95) have been major factors in the continued preservation of Charlestown's local and rural character.

Economic opportunity in Charlestown is focused on business retention, business expansion in character with the community and tourism. This chapter describes the current economy and employment characteristics. It focuses on Charlestown's tourist economy which relies heavily on the town's natural, scenic and historic amenities, and discusses how, through increased recreation opportunities, the town can expand tourism. The goals, policies and actions for economic opportunity in Charlestown are intended to be complementary with the state's goal that economic development occur in a sustainable and integrated manner. In Charlestown this means economic activity which supports, protects and enhances the town's important resources.

## **RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER CHAPTERS**

This chapter complements a number of others:

### **Natural Resources, Recreation, and Historic and Cultural Resources Chapters**

Charlestown recognizes the economic value of its natural resources, including its beaches and salt ponds, its abundant open space areas available for both active and passive outdoor recreation, and its cultural features and scenic landscapes which are described in detail in the above chapters. Many of the recommendations in this chapter mirror those in the chapters on natural resources, recreation, and historic and cultural resources, Charlestown's most valuable assets, all of which

are critical to the support and expansion of tourism, as well as to the high quality of life enjoyed by Charlestown residents and visitors.

### **Natural Hazards Chapter**

Sea level rise and increasing storm intensity will have an economic impact on the town, including potential loss of tax revenue from damaged properties, the cost of debris cleanup from storms and other natural events, and the negative impact on tourism due to damage to the water quality or integrity of the salt ponds. Actions to prepare for and adapt to these conditions are critical to protecting the town's economy.

### **Land Use Chapter**

The Land Use chapter describes land uses and development patterns, and identifies the town's zoning districts and the allowable uses within those districts. It includes a proposed Future Land Use Map with recommendations for areas to be used for commercial and mixed use developments.

## **EXISTING CONDITIONS**

### **Current Economy**

Charlestown's economy is highly dependent on tourism and associated activities, and as a result is highly seasonal. Tourism provides employment to local residents, revenues to local merchants, and property taxes to the town on seasonally occupied homes. Commercial, and to a lesser extent industrial enterprises, still play an important role, while agriculture and aquaculture are growing parts of the local economy.

### Tourism

Charlestown's tourist season produces both direct and indirect revenues for the town. The main revenue source is from residential property taxes, a significant portion of which are paid by seasonal residents. This is a benefit to the town, since these residents place a limited demand on town services and make use of town facilities only for the period during the tourist season. With the exception of fees collected from the use of Ninigret Park which are placed in a restricted fund, beach parking fees and other recreational fees are collected by the town and contribute to the general fund.

Charlestown has several inns, motels and bed and breakfast establishments that provide both seasonal and year round accommodations. Some private homes are also rented seasonally. All accommodations charge a state room tax, a portion of which is returned to the town. Public campgrounds managed by the Department of Environmental Management at Burlingame State

Park, the Charlestown Breachway and East Beach offer over 750 campsites. These and other private camps help to serve the seasonal influx of vacationers. There are several convenience food stores and restaurants, art galleries, gift shops and marinas that serve both residents and the tourist population in the summer.



Frances Topping Cross Mills Shop

Outdoor recreation is an important part of the tourist economy. Hunting, fishing, swimming, boating, bicycling, hiking, canoeing, kayaking, star gazing, photography and bird watching are all popular outdoor activities that attract people to Charlestown. Agriculture related tourism (agritourism) is an option for improving the incomes and potential economic viability of small farms. Tasting honey, picking vegetables, attending workshops on composting and growing vegetables, and caring for farm animals are activities which agritourists can choose from. Enhancing these opportunities offers the potential to grow the local economy while continuing to protect the town's open spaces and natural resources.

Finally, Charlestown has a number of unique festivals and events which draw specific tourists. These include the Charlestown Seafood Festival, the Rhythm and Roots Festival, and the South County Seaside Classic Soccer Tournament held each year at Ninigret Park, and the Narragansett Indian Tribe's Pow Wow held every August, as well as fall and holiday art walks.

Tourism in Charlestown is supported by the Charlestown Chamber of Commerce and the South County Tourism Council (also representing ten other towns of southern Rhode Island). The town also has an active Economic Improvement Commission (EIC), appointed by the Town Council, whose mandate is to support and enhance the business environment in Charlestown, with an emphasis on business development in keeping with the rural and coastal character of Charlestown. The EIC, as advisory to the Town Council, is charged with identifying tools and strategies to both support existing businesses and encourage the establishment of new businesses.

## Commercial Activity

Charlestown is primarily a residential community with limited commercial activity. Restaurants, construction and retail are the largest commercial sectors in the town; they are the business activities which employ the largest numbers of people in Charlestown (the other major employment sectors being manufacturing, government and health care, as shown in Table EO-1).

Charlestown provides a reasonable level of commercial development with a mix of village, general and highway commercial zoning districts. Mixed use is supported by the Traditional Village District along Old Post Road in the Cross Mills section of town; this district is intended to encourage small scale business development compatible with existing residential uses. Commercial uses, for the most part, are concentrated along Route 1A (Old Post Road), Route 1 (Post Road) and Route 2 (South County Trail). Smaller commercial areas include Carolina and Shannock Villages and the Matunuck Schoolhouse Road / Charlestown Beach Road area (see Land Use chapter).

Charlestown does not have infrastructure to support large commercial development. Because the town has no public water supply or sewer system, the need to rely on wells and on-site septic systems has kept development at a small scale. The southern portion of town is within the Salt Ponds Special Area Management Plan (SAMP) area which has environmental and density constraints. A year round population of less than 8,000 people also does not provide a strong market for retail/commercial goods; while the summer population makes a significant contribution to the town's economy, the market demand that results from this tourist activity is seasonal. The increasing trend of on-line purchasing and the location of chain stores in nearby communities also affects the local demand for certain goods. Overall, large scale commercial development does not fit the rural character of Charlestown or the market needs of its residents.

## Industrial Activity

At present, the sole manufacturing industries in Charlestown are Kenyon Industries, located on Route 2 beside the Pawcatuck River, and Gordon Fabricating, Inc. on Kings Factory Road. With over 300,000 square feet of processing space, Kenyon Industries does dyeing, finishing, coating and printing of woven synthetic fabrics operating three continuous shifts. Kenyon also houses research and development facilities to create new, complex fabrics and certified testing laboratories to evaluate fabric, dye, and finishing performance. It employs approximately 250 people.

The only other land in Charlestown that has been used for industrial purposes was the large United Nuclear Corporation parcel in the northern section of town, which was the site of a nuclear processing facility. The plant, which opened in 1964, used chemical processes for the recovery of uranium from spent fuel rods. Following the closure of the plant in 1980 it was considered as a

suitable location for industrial research and development. However, the presence of hazardous material made that impracticable. Following a ten year decontamination effort it was considered safe in 1995 by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. It is now classified as an archived Superfund site. In 2001, The Nature Conservancy purchased 841 acres of the site and established the Francis C. Carter Memorial Preserve. An additional 271 contiguous acres of the site were purchased by the Nature Conservancy in 2015 and placed under permanent conservation easement, foreclosing the option of future development on this site and allowing public use of the property for passive recreation. The zoning designation of this parcel is Planned Development, but it is identified on the *Future Land Use Map* (see Map LU-4 in the Land Use chapter) as open space.

The other industrial-related use in town is quarrying and sand and gravel extraction, which is currently a prohibited use. Extractive industries are discussed in the Natural Resources chapter.

### Agriculture and Aquaculture

Rhode Island is a “right-to-farm” state which means that it is the policy of the state to promote an environment in which agricultural operations are safeguarded against nuisance actions arising from conflicts with other land uses, provided that best management practices are followed. The Town of Charlestown’s website (see Agricultural Preservation Commission page), contains a list of 34 local farms, most of which are small family owned farms. These farms raise horses; chickens for meat and eggs; cows, goats, pigs, sheep and other livestock for meat, dairy and/or fiber; vegetables, corn, potatoes, apples, herbs and flowers; and hay, compost and firewood for sale. Also included on the list are salt pond oyster farmers. Because the farms are predominately family-owned and operated, they are not a significant source of local employment. However, small scale agriculture can still be a contributor to the local economy. A 2010 study, updated in 2015, of the economic contribution of agriculture by the University of Connecticut<sup>1</sup> found that each dollar in sales generated by the agricultural industry creates up to two additional dollars of economic activity.



Frances Topping

Sweet Hollow Sheep Farm

<sup>1</sup> Rigoberto Lopez, “*Economic Impacts of Connecticut’s Agricultural Industry*,” University of Connecticut, 2010

Tree farming is also an important land use and economic activity in Charlestown. As of 2018, over 1,700 acres of land in Charlestown are enrolled in the Farm, Forest and Open Space (FFOS) program. Most of these are managed forestlands that produce firewood and lumber. Many other Charlestown land parcels not enrolled in FFOS are also managed as wood lots. Property owners need better information on forest management, and how to connect with forest managers and create markets for firewood and other woodland products. See the Energy Chapter for more discussion on wood as an energy source.

Organic farming is increasing in popularity locally, as consumers demonstrate a willingness to pay a premium for locally grown organic crops. Many local farmers sell wholesale and several local grocers, restaurants and florists have begun to work with local farmers in “farm to table” and “farm to shop” agreements that benefit both the farms and the retailers.

Local farmers are also increasingly engaged in creative finance arrangements such as community supported agriculture (CSA), farm share programs and pick your own (PYO), as well as farm stand sales, harvest festivals, hay rides, corn mazes, farm tours and related activities that serve to increase revenues for the farmers. The Charlestown Farmers Market, sponsored by the Charlestown Land Trust (see chapter cover page), is a popular attraction for residents and tourists alike, providing ready access to fresh locally grown food during the season, as well as contributing to a rural and village ambience.

Map EO-1 shows important farmland soils in Charlestown. These include prime farmland soils, soils of statewide importance and soils of local importance. Significant concentrations of farmland soils occur on the outwash plain south of the moraine (Route 1) and along the coastal ponds. Much of this area supporting prime soils and those soils of statewide importance is either developed or lies within Ninigret National Wildlife Refuge and Ninigret Park. There are also clusters of important farmland soils in the northeastern part of Charlestown and along the Pawcatuck River in the northwest. Farmland soils are a finite resource, and once lost to development, are irreplaceable. Their use for agriculture contributes to the rural character that enhances the quality of life in Charlestown and attracts tourism.

Shellfish aquaculture is a growing industry in Rhode Island, with the large majority consisting of oysters, which are especially in demand as interest in locally grown and fresh food has surged. While local agriculture has been slowly growing as an economic sector, aquaculture has been growing very rapidly. As of 2018, there were 76 aquaculture farms in Rhode Island, with over 319 acres under cultivation generating \$6 million in product consumption value.<sup>2</sup> Aquaculture also contributes to employment and local purchases of equipment and supplies. The health of the salt ponds is important to aquaculture and tourism and needs to be protected; see the Natural Resources and Natural Hazards chapters.

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<sup>2</sup> *Aquaculture in Rhode Island 2018 Annual Status Report*, prepared by David Beutel, Aquaculture Coordinator, Coastal Resources Management Council

Ninigret and Quonochontaug Ponds are nearly ideal for shellfish cultivation, due to the protective environment provided by the barrier beaches, the small tidal range and moderate temperatures. As of 2018, there are fourteen active aquaculture leases in Ninigret Pond, encompassing a total of 64.95 acres, and eight active aquaculture leases in Quonochontaug Pond, encompassing a total of 13.86 acres. One marina on Ninigret Pond is also an aquaculture co-operative which includes an oyster hatchery.



Ken Lopardo Oyster Farmers in Ninigret Pond

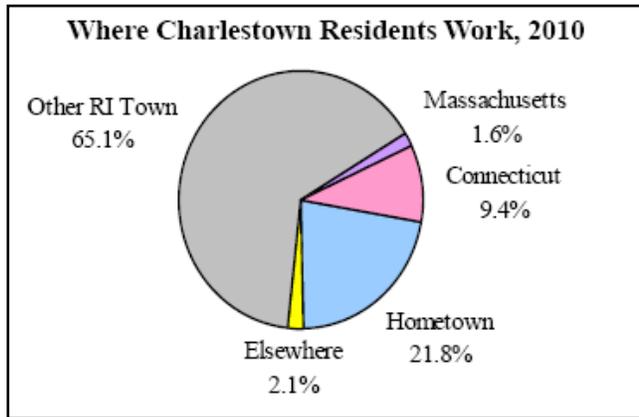
While aquaculture has a promising future as a sustainable and important local economic activity, it must be balanced with other uses of the salt ponds, which are critical to Charlestown's tourist economy.

### **Employment Characteristics**

Apart from tourism, Charlestown has a limited employment base of small businesses with few employees. It is a commuter town, with residents who work in surrounding towns and throughout the state as well as in eastern Connecticut, and is a retirement community.

Charlestown's labor force, people who live in town and are either working or are actively looking for work, peaked in 2009 at just above 4,800. In the mid to late 2010's it averaged 4,100 persons.

Unemployment has generally been decreasing in Charlestown, dropping from an estimated high near 16% in January of 2012 to approximately 4% in July of 2019. The high unemployment rates early in the decade which dropped in later years is a reflection of the regional and national economic downturn and the slow recovery that followed. Within any given year, the unemployment rates tend to peak during the winter months. This is reflective of the seasonal nature of work in Charlestown.



**Figure EO-1 Where Residents Work**  
**Source: RI Department of Labor and Training**

As Figure EO-1 shows, less than a quarter (21.8%) of working Charlestown residents actually work in town. Roughly two thirds of residents work in other Rhode Island towns; many work in the adjacent communities of South Kingstown and Westerly, both of which have more commercial and industrial employment than does Charlestown. South Kingstown also hosts the University of Rhode Island, one of the region’s major employers.

Table EO-1 shows employment in Charlestown by economic sector<sup>3</sup> in 2006, 2009 and 2015. Aside from manufacturing, the largest sector of local employment is in accommodation and food services, followed by government, construction, health care and social assistance, and retail trade. The high level of employment in accommodation and food services is part of the tourist economy, with local employees catering to the needs of vacationers. The large number of government jobs includes those who work in town government and the school system. In addition to municipal employees, there are state and federal employees staffing parks and wildlife refuges.

Construction has historically been a leading source of employment. The availability of construction jobs fluctuates in direct relationship to the economy and stabilization of the housing market. Construction activity includes the conversion of seasonal homes to year round and the upkeep of both year round and seasonal homes, as well as new home construction.

Manufacturing jobs, represented principally by employment at Kenyon Industries were not presented for the last two columns on the table (the years 2009 and 2015) but it is important to note that this textile manufacturing, finishing and research facility is the largest single employer in the town.

According to the data, job growth has occurred in arts, entertainment and recreation, suggesting potential in these areas. Modest growth has also occurred in finance and insurance. The largest decline in employment is in transportation and warehousing. Health care and social assistance, retail trade, professional and technical services and wholesale trade all show a modest drop off. However, not all commercial activity in town is represented by the RI Department of Labor and Training employment data. Activities such as home businesses for instance may be underrepresented.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dlt.ri.gov/lmi/pdf/stateofstate.pdf>

**Table EO-1**  
**Employment in Charlestown by Sector, 2006, 2009 and 2015**

<b>Establishment Employment</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2015</b>
<b>Total Private &amp; Government</b>	<b>1,632</b>	<b>1,460</b>	<b>1,550</b>
<b>Total Private Only</b>	<b>1,459</b>	<b>1,258</b>	<b>1,337</b>
Accommodation & Food Service	207	187	258
Government	173	202	213
Construction	185	145	166
Health Care & Social Assistance	186	177	138
Retail Trade	174	143	135
Administrative Support & Waste Management	78	61	75
Finance & Insurance	28	35	51
Professional & Technical Services	59	45	42
Other Services	32	38	37
Real Estate & Rental & Leasing	20	19	27
Information	17	20	20
Wholesale Trade	36	21	19
Manufacturing	308	*	*
Transportation & Warehousing	117	12	*
Arts, Entertainment, & Recreation	7	20	*
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing & Hunting	*	*	*
Mining	*	*	*
Educational Services	0	*	*
Management of Companies & Enterprises	0	0	*
Utilities	0	0	0
* Confidential or non-publishable data			

**Source: RI Department of Labor and Training**

According to the Department of Labor and Training<sup>4</sup> about 48.4% of the jobs in Charlestown were filled in 2010 by Charlestown residents. And according to a survey conducted for this comprehensive plan, the town generally views itself as a commuter and retirement community and does not see the need to greatly expand local employment opportunities. The State of Rhode Island Division of Planning estimates that employment in Charlestown will remain stable or decrease slightly over the next several years. This may be reflective of the increasing numbers of retired persons living in Charlestown.

<sup>4</sup> Source: RIDLT based on American Community Survey Data 2010 <http://www.dlt.ri.gov/lmi/pdf/commute.pdf>

## ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY: ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

### Statewide Issues

Charlestown, like the State of Rhode Island, seeks a more sustainable economy that is less dependent on land development and new housing construction. The state has endorsed this approach to the economy through the adoption of Land Use 2025: RI State Land Use Policies and Plan (LU 2025)<sup>5</sup>. LU 2025, an element of the State Guide Plan adopted in 2006, is Rhode Island's plan for conservation and development in the 21st century. It challenges Rhode Islanders to work collectively to appropriately design, build and redevelop its communities while protecting its traditional neighborhoods and landscapes.

The principal goal of the plan is to reduce suburban “sprawl” development and to concentrate new development in areas where the services necessary to support higher density are already in place. The distinction between Rhode Island's urban and rural areas is defined by an urban services boundary; those areas within the boundary, along with potential growth centers outside of it, are identified as optimum areas for accommodating the bulk of the state's development needs through 2025. Charlestown is outside of the urban services boundary, meaning that state and local policies and investments should not encourage or support growth and development. Charlestown's development patterns and land uses are characterized by the important natural, scenic and cultural centers that the state is seeking to protect; to be consistent with the State Guide Plan, the town's economic opportunities should build on these assets and focus on small scale development and redevelopment in the villages and identified growth centers.

The adopted Economic Development element (2014) of the State Guide Plan sets several goals for the state. They include support for the industries and investments that play to Rhode Island's strengths, and the creation of a stronger and more resilient statewide economy. Charlestown's economic strength and long term sustainability, and its competitive advantage rely heavily on a tourist and recreation economy. The protection and expansion of these sectors, and the natural resources they depend on, are the focus of Charlestown's plan for economic opportunity.

In “*Vision for Rhode Island Agriculture*”, a five-year strategic plan published in 2011, the state expressed its support for growth in the agricultural sector of the economy. The state has adopted a policy of strengthening and supporting Rhode Island's burgeoning food system businesses, which include agriculture, aquaculture and fishing, food processing and production, and marketing and sales. Charlestown considers the growing agricultural economy as an addition to the predominantly tourist and recreation economy. The town recognizes the relationship between the use of open space for agriculture and the protection of the town's rural character, but also the need to balance the expansion of agriculture and agriculture related uses with protection of the environment and the quality of life in predominately residential areas.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.planning.ri.gov/documents/121/landuse2025.pdf>

## **Regional Opportunities**

As noted above, most Charlestown residents work outside of Charlestown and many of these work in the adjoining communities of South Kingstown and Westerly. As a result, the economic development policies of these communities can have a significant impact on employment and income in Charlestown.

The comprehensive plans of both South Kingstown and Westerly stress balanced economic growth, providing economic opportunities while protecting sensitive environmental areas. There is a strong emphasis on protecting and enhancing natural resources as fundamental to the local economy, as well as enhancing and expanding the tourist industry as a basic economic activity. Charlestown shares these goals of balanced economic growth, protection of natural resources and expansion of tourism, and looks forward to continuing to cooperate with neighboring communities to achieve these mutual goals.

## **Expanding the Tourist Economy**

Seasonal residents are an important economic force, attracted to Charlestown for its natural beauty and enduring rural character. The seasonal market is currently a major factor in the town's economy. The visitors that come to Charlestown each summer increase the demand for goods and services, providing revenues for area businesses and wages for seasonal employees. The Charlestown Economic Improvement Commission (EIC) has identified seasonal business goods (including food related) and services (particularly renovation, remodeling, construction, landscaping and home management industry) as growth sectors of the local economy. Hotels and bed and breakfasts appear to be declining locally. This could be that new technology, such as Airbnb and Uber, provide accommodation and transportation alternatives for consumers. It is unknown to what extent this new "sharing" economy will drive economic growth, but it can support a greater diversity of visitors to the area, such as those traveling off season or without transportation.

Creating tourism opportunities beyond the typical summer season should be explored. The town's expansive open space and conservation lands, dark skies, rural character, and cultural and historical heritage provide opportunities beyond swimming, boating and beach-combing. Charlestown has long recognized this possibility; recommendations for supporting and expanding tourism go back to the Town of Charlestown Comprehensive Plan adopted in 1992. Some opportunities are described below.

### Nature and Heritage Trails

The development of miles of hiking trails throughout Charlestown's open space and conservation areas have added immeasurably to the town's attractiveness, both as a place to live and to visit. Promotion of cultural and heritage trails would stimulate interest in the cultural as well as natural

resources of Charlestown. For example, the Charlestown Parks and Recreation Department developed a 26-mile trail, named the Deerfoot Trail, after Ellison Myers Brown Sr., of the Narragansett Indian Tribe who was an Olympic marathoner (1936) and two-time winner of the Boston Marathon (1936, 1939). This trail could be a model to develop additional walking and biking trails focusing on mill villages, historic homes and other cultural attractions (see Historic and Cultural Resources chapter). Linking these sites to the hiking trails in the parks and the refuges would add an historic and cultural element to the tourism industry in Charlestown.



Jane Weidman

Trail Head at US Fish and Wildlife Kettle Pond Preserve

Maps that identify any number of nature and heritage trails can be created and made available online, and at the tourist information kiosk run by the Charlestown Chamber of Commerce. Migratory bird-watching activities during the fall and winter months could be part of this effort. Linking recreational opportunities to businesses can be done through synergy in marketing. For instance, maps could be created that link hiking, biking and kayaking trails with nearby restaurants and specialty business stores.

### Dark Skies

Charlestown has the darkest night skies between New York and Boston, which draws many thousands of visitors year round to the Frosty Drew Observatory and Science Center in Ninigret Park, where on unclouded nights people can view star clusters, the moon's surface and the planets. In addition to the observatory, a star theater was constructed in 2006 to expand viewing opportunities and provide a space for lectures and a gallery of astrophotography. The town also

has a “dark sky” ordinance to regulate the installation of outdoor commercial lighting to protect Charlestown's unique dark sky for astronomy, enjoyment and health purposes. Tourism based on dark skies has been very successful in many parts of the United States and could be marketed in Charlestown as a year round economic activity.

### Programs and Events

Expanding the Parks and Recreation Department programs would encourage people to visit Charlestown during the off season, as well as provide additional activities for residents. Events such as cultural and art festivals and antique fairs, and activities such as children’s programs and educational and craft classes, could be developed both during and beyond the summer season. Agencies such as the Cross Mills Library, US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Salt Ponds Coalition also provide programs which could be publicized as attractions (see Recreation chapter).



Scott MacNeill

Milky Way over Frosty Drew Observatory

## **Additional Businesses Opportunities**

### Supporting Businesses

Although many retail businesses may not be feasible year round in Charlestown, there are enough summer visitors to make certain seasonal businesses viable. Examples include boating and fishing supplies, water sports equipment sales and rentals, fish markets, additional restaurants, art galleries and antique shops, and bicycle sales and rentals. These could be promoted by offering short-term leases to seasonal entrepreneurs, which could be coordinated through the Chamber of Commerce or a business support organization.

There are other options the town can explore to help businesses, including reviewing the zoning ordinance to ensure that appropriate small businesses are allowed by right in Charlestown, establishing funding programs to help with building and site improvements, and making use of state programs to help small business. Supporting local businesses can also be done by ensuring that design standards for new development are in place to protect the character of the town, particularly in the villages of Carolina, Shannock and Cross Mills and in the Traditional Village District and along the Route 1 scenic highway. Local character and the uniqueness of the community is protected by preventing homogenous development in the form of chain store brand-style building design and placement. A thorough discussion of the commercial zoning districts in Charlestown, and the need to define them and undertake a comprehensive review of allowable uses to ensure compatibility of intensity and scale by district is contained in the Land Use chapter.

### Home Occupations

The combination of an educated populace and available communications technology suggest that Charlestown will be part of the growing trend of technical and professional services as home occupations. With specific exclusions (for example, vehicle repair, hair salons, exercise studios, medical offices, animal boarding) home occupations are permitted in Charlestown provided they meet general performance standards. The use of private homes for short term rental via the internet (Airbnb) is a home occupation that is growing, one that supports the tourist economy, but can also have a negative impact on neighborhoods. Regulations governing home occupations should be reviewed to ensure that a variety of low-impact home based businesses can thrive in Charlestown in a way that enhances the local economy without compromising neighborhood character.

### Cottage Industries

Many cottage industries that produce homemade and handcrafted goods for sale to visitors, tourists and others already exist in Charlestown. These goods are generally produced on a small scale by residents in their homes or outbuildings with no negative impact on residential character. Products include locally made art and natural resource based products, reflecting Charlestown's coastal and rural character. These also include light assembly operations such as signs and specialty furniture production or textile products like rugs and blankets. Such operations may otherwise be considered to be manufacturing uses, but can be allowed as long as they are done at a small scale with no deleterious impacts or hazardous wastes produced, and can meet the general performance standards for home occupations.

### Meeting the Needs of an Aging Population

As described in the Housing Choice chapter, the median age of Charlestown residents will continue to rise as the baby boomers age and many seasonal home owners retire to, or at least spend more of the year in, Charlestown. Well over a quarter of the year round population is currently over 60 years of age. This continued trend in demographics can provide economic opportunities in the

area of senior support services. These can include recreational activities geared towards young seniors, transportation services, and medical and personal care such as home health aides, cleaning services, senior day care and even assisted living.

## **Agriculture**

### Promoting Farmland Acquisition and Agricultural Grant Opportunities

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RI DEM) has initiated a number of programs to help local farmers and grow the state’s “green economy”. These include the Farm Energy Program, the Local Agriculture and Seafood Act Grants Program and the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, as well as the Farm Acquisition Program, rolled out in 2017. In this last program, RI DEM will buy agricultural land threatened with development, protect it through a deed restriction and then resell it at a steep discount to young or beginning farmers who would not otherwise be able to afford the land.

Charlestown can encourage farmland protection and acquisition by supporting these programs. The Agricultural Preservation Commission can work to educate farmers on methods to acquire and manage farmland in a sustainable and economically viable manner.

### Farm Retail

An important part of supporting local agriculture is encouraging farmers to have farm stands on their properties as well as providing centralized locations for farmers’ markets. These markets bring together residents, families, farmers and artists in a community oriented way. The state’s farmers’ markets, many of which are year round, are well attended community events that sell not only farm raised meat, seafood, home grown produce and baked goods, but art and local crafts. In addition to being an economic activity, locally sourced products reduce carbon footprint, an energy goal, and increase the health of the community.



Frances Topping

Local Farm Stand

## **ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY: GOALS, POLICIES AND ACTIONS**

### **GOALS**

- Goal 1** Create and maintain an economic and regulatory climate that allows small businesses to establish, grow and thrive.
- Goal 2** Promote economic activities that rely on and protect Charlestown's natural, scenic, and historic amenities.
- Goal 3** Support and expand agriculture as an important and viable economic activity.

### **POLICIES AND ACTIONS**

Through its policies and actions, Charlestown seeks to achieve its economic opportunity goals while preserving its small town and rural character and protecting its cultural, scenic and natural resources.

- Goal 1** Create and maintain an economic and regulatory climate that allows small businesses to establish, grow and thrive.

- Policy 1.1** Attract, retain and support businesses that directly benefit residents, tourists and visitors.

**Action 1** Review and amend the zoning ordinance as needed to ensure that a variety of small scale and mixed commercial-residential uses are allowed at appropriate locations, particularly within the villages of Carolina, Shannock and Cross Mills, and within the Traditional Village District along the Old Post Road corridor.

**Action 2** Establish a funding mechanism, or tax incentive program, that would allow the town to assist in small business development and/or enhancement, such as building and site improvements, signage and promotion. These could include establishing a revolving fund for building improvement loans, or a tax rebate program that offsets the cost of signage and landscaping improvements.

**Action 3** Utilize the resources of the RI Commerce Corporation, including the RI Small Business Center at the University of Rhode Island, to assist in business development, building reuse and tourism support.

**Action 4** Allow and encourage cost saving measures such as community wells and shared septic systems, and common signage and shared parking for businesses.

**Policy 1.2**     **Establish design standards for new development and redevelopment to both protect the character of the town and ensure vibrant successful commercial areas.**

**Action 1**    Establish specific site and building design standards for Carolina, Shannock and Cross Mills and the Traditional Village District regulating building and parking placement, building form and design, and signage and site amenities so as to protect and enhance traditional uses and development patterns.

**Action 2**    Provide town-wide standards that protect against homogeneous development represented by chain stores, including “small-box” stores, while allowing the flexibility that encourages local businesses.

**Policy 1.3**     **Identify and support economic activities with potential for growth and/or which could complement existing activities.**

**Action 1**    Review and amend the zoning ordinance as needed to ensure compatible manufacturing activities in the industrial zones in town, and to provide additional options for light assembly and small scale production in the commercial zoning districts.

**Action 2**    Review, and amend if necessary, local regulations that support home-based businesses, including those that provide many of the local services required in a small community and do not impair or negatively impact surrounding properties.

**Action 3**    Review and amend the zoning ordinance as needed to ensure that opportunities for senior support services are allowed and encouraged in appropriate districts in town.

**Goal 2**        **Promote economic activities that rely on and protect Charlestown’s natural, scenic, and historic amenities.**

**Policy 2.1**     **Continue to acquire, protect and manage open space areas for passive and active recreation use.**

**Action 1**    Identify and rank open space land that provides additional passive recreation opportunities.

**Action 2**    Provide trailhead facilities and well-marked trails to facilitate use of natural areas.

**Policy 2.2**     **Utilize Ninigret Park in a manner that is compatible with the adjacent Ninigret National Wildlife Refuge.**

**Action 1** Investigate the possibility of establishing public events at the park such as a community yard sale, an arts festival or an antique show.

**Action 2** Promote year round tourism based on Charlestown's dark skies and the night sky viewing opportunities at the Frosty Drew Observatory.

**Policy 2.3** **Maintain the varied recreational opportunities on Ninigret and Quonochontaug Ponds, on the freshwater ponds and the Pawcatuck River, for boating, swimming, fishing and shellfishing.**

**Action 1** Investigate the potential for additional boat ramps or small boat put-ins to increase access to the salt ponds and the Pawcatuck River.

**Action 2** Undertake a study to evaluate beach access and parking, and if necessary, develop a plan to meet demand while not encouraging over-use.

**Policy 2.4** **Continue to support the Economic Improvement Commission, Charlestown Chamber of Commerce and South County Tourism Council in promoting local events and recreational activities, including year round activities, as an attractive alternative to more distant vacation destinations.**

**Action 1** Publicize the wide array of outdoor recreational opportunities available to visitors and tourists through various media and organizations, including the town website.

**Action 2** Develop a series of hiking, walking, biking and kayaking/canoeing maps of Charlestown showing locations of all natural areas with trails and access points; locations of mill villages and cultural sites; scenic bike routes; and water trails, along with locations of local businesses that support tourism and outdoor activities.

**Action 3** Develop tourism packages focused on visitors of varying ages and interests including ecotourism, heritage tourism, agri-tourism and dark sky tourism.

**Policy 2.5** **Develop and support regional recreation and tourist activities.**

**Action 1** Provide links to regional tourism routes in Washington County and eastern Connecticut.

**Action 2** Develop a scenic and historic driving tour contiguous with and similar to one developed by the Town of South Kingstown (posted on town website).

- Action 3** Develop a coastal bicycle route along the Route 1A corridor in conjunction with Westerly and South Kingstown (see Transportation chapter).
- Action 4** Develop, jointly with Carolina and Kenyon in Richmond, a heritage trail along the Pawcatuck River that would link the Carolina Management Area and the Great Swamp Management Area.
- Action 5** Develop and market an art trail, linking artist studios, galleries, and performance spaces.
- Action 6** Work with the Narragansett Indian Tribe to market information on local Native American heritage.

Working with the Narragansett Indian Tribe to promote this important part of Charlestown’s heritage as a form of cultural tourism is a real opportunity. Such an effort may require coordination with the Tomaquag Museum. Although in nearby Exeter, the Tomaquag Museum focuses on the history of the Narragansett. Founded in the 1950’s, it is one of the oldest tribal museums in the country.

**Goal 3      Support and expand agriculture as an important and viable economic activity.**

Agriculture is an integral part of the character of Charlestown and a growing sector of the economy. Agriculture should be encouraged and helped to become sustainable, including the allowance of farm related accessory uses of a scale and compatibility with surrounding properties, particularly residential. The growth of agriculture must also be done in an environmentally sensitive manner.

**Policy 3.1      Support existing farms and promote the establishment of new farms.**

- Action 1** Work with the Charlestown Land Trust to identify and preserve prime agricultural lands, with funding available from local and state bond money (including from the State Agricultural Preservation Commission).
- Action 2** Partner with active farms and/or community groups to develop an agricultural lease program to assist new farmers.
- Action 3** Collaborate with the RI DEM Division of Agriculture on marketing and promotion, including use of grants opportunities such as the Local Agriculture and Seafood Act program to support the growth, development and marketing of local food and seafood.

**Policy 3.2 Promote farms and farming as multi-use operations.**

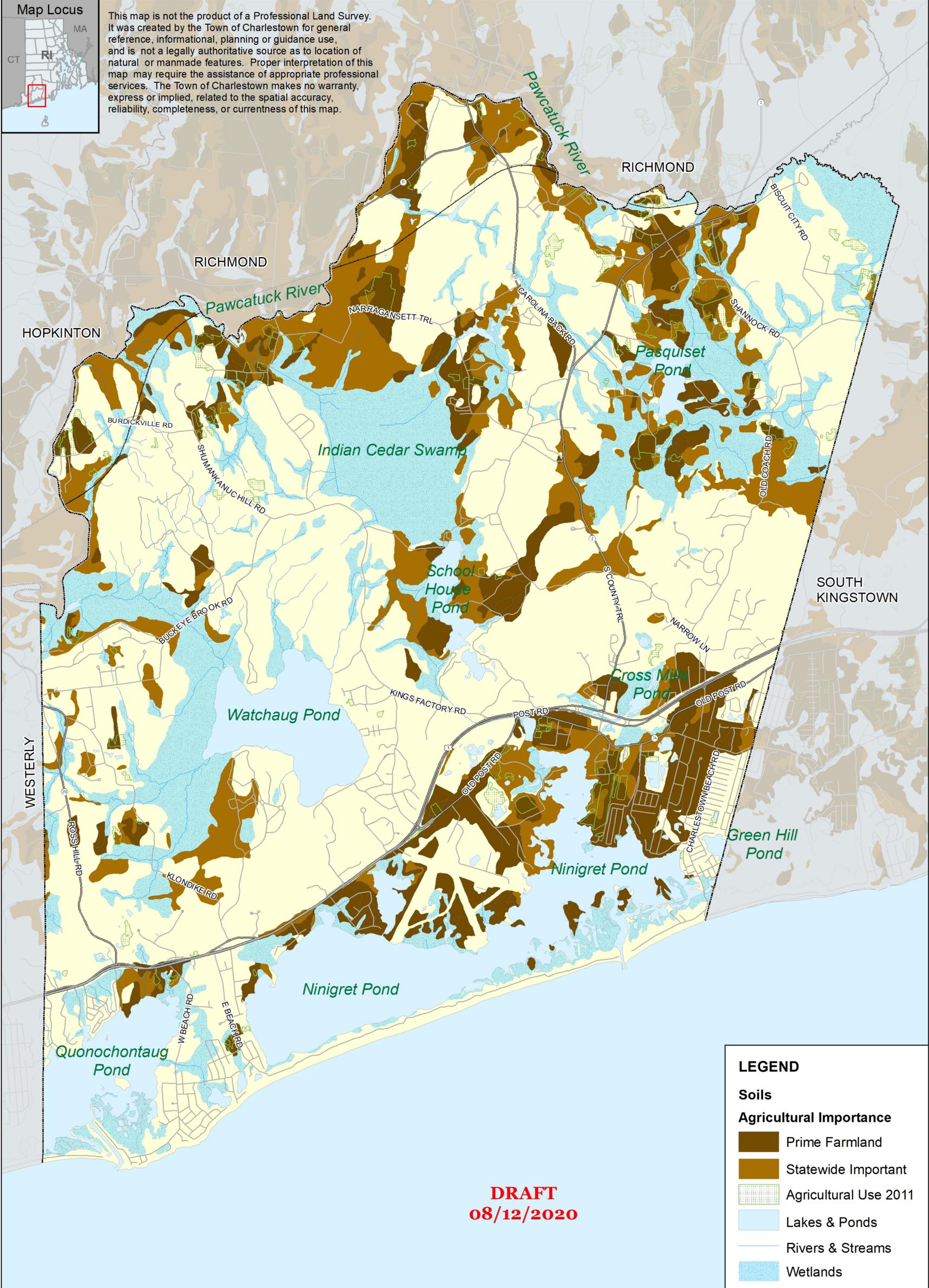
**Action 1** Review and amend the zoning ordinance as needed to allow appropriate accessory uses on active farms, such as farmers’ markets, retail sales and special events, that are in scale with the size of the farm, are sensitive to environmental and neighborhood impacts, and are linked to the potential for development pressure on the land based on the underlying zoning.

**Policy 3.3 Support and manage aquaculture in the salt ponds as a sustainable and important local economic activity.**

**Action 1** Work cooperatively with aquaculture farmers to educate the public on shellfish cultivation and growing in the salt ponds, to both encourage a balanced and peaceful co-existence with other salt pond users and to provide public support for this growing industry.



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**LEGEND**

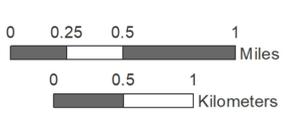
**Soils**

**Agricultural Importance**

- Prime Farmland
- Statewide Important
- Agricultural Use 2011
- Lakes & Ponds
- Rivers & Streams
- Wetlands

**DRAFT**  
**08/12/2020**

Map Sources:



**TOWN OF CHARLESTOWN**  
RHODE ISLAND



Prepared by:  
Town of Charlestown  
Mason & Associates, Inc.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN, 2020

**IMPORTANT FARM SOILS**

**MAP EO-1**