

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 City.

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 is Rhode Island’s third largest City stretching from the coastal village of Pawtuxet to the Historic Farm Loop in the west. Cranston’s nearly 83,000 people live in diverse neighborhoods representing many eras of neighborhood design and intensity. Cranston hosts prominent industrial, commercial, retail and government employment centers employing 35,000 within city limits. Although it is a city, Cranston is a suburb of Providence, and retains a distinctly suburban character.

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). 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 be built upon previously agriculture and open space to the west of I-295 to the Scituate border. Additional information can be found in Figure 13-1, *Existing Land Use*.

Table 13-1. Existing Land Use				
Land Use	RIGIS LULC Code 2020	RIGIS LULC Description (2020)	City Land Area (Acres)	% of City 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
Commercial	120	Commercial (sale of products and services)	854	5%
	152	Commercial/Industrial Mixed	187	1%
	Total Commercial			1,041
Industrial	130	Industrial (manufacturing, design, assembly, etc.)	641	3%
	144	Water and Sewage Treatment	25	<1%
	Total Industrial			666
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
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
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
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%
	230	Orchards, Groves, Nurseries	122	1%
	250	Idle Agriculture (abandoned fields and orchards)	92	<1%

Table 13-1. Existing Land Use				
Land Use	RIGIS LULC Code 2020	RIGIS LULC Description (2020)	City Land Area (Acres)	% of City Land Area
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
Water	500	Water	369	2%
	Total Water			369
Developed Recreation	161	Developed Recreation (all recreation)	545	3%
	Total Developed Recreation			545
Wetlands	600	Wetland	68	<1%
	Total Wetland			68
Ground-Mounted Solar Energy Systems	148	Ground-Mounted Solar Energy Systems	118	<1%
	Total Ground-Mounted Solar Energy Systems			118
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). Meanwhile, over the past decade, the City has experienced a significant loss of forests, agriculture, and vacant lands, including 78 acres of agricultural land, 226 acres of forest coverage, and 13 acres of vacant and transitional lands. However, the City has gained 118 acres of ground-mounted solar to the land area. Additionally, 141 acres of residential land have been developed within the City.

Table 13-2. Land Use Over Time				
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%

Table 13-2. Land Use Over Time

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 Oxboes 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 2012 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 City. Today, industrial parks are located primarily in the southern and eastern part of Cranston, but there are scattered manufacturing zones to the northwest. A large quarry, owned by P.J. Keating Company, is centrally located and comprises roughly 183 acres (P.J. Keating, 2024).

The City 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 2012 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 establishes the zoning districts in the City and proscribes which uses are allowed in each district.

Approximately 15,620 acres 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. 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 80,000 square feet to 6,000 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 6,000 and 8,000 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.

Table 13-3. Land Area by Zoning Category		
Zoning District	Acres	Percentage of Total Land Area
Residential or R Zones		
A-80	4,728	30%
A-20	2,286	15%
A-12	264	2%
A-8	1,695	11%
A-6	1,616	10%
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%

Table 13-3. Land Area by Zoning Category

Zoning District	Acres	Percentage of Total Land Area
TOTAL	15,620	100%

Source: City of Cranston, RIGIS, 2024

The zoning ordinance also establishes the dimensional requirements for lot sizes within the City. 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, *Zoning District Standards* and Table 13-5, *Residential Planned District Zoning Standards*.

Table 13-4. Zoning District Dimensional Standards

Zoning District	Minimum Lot Area (ft.)	Minimum Lot Width and Frontage (ft.)	Minimum Yards (ft.) Front	Minimum Yards (ft.) Rear	Minimum Yards (ft.) Side	Maximum Lot Coverage	Maximum Building Height
S-1, A-80	80,000	200	40	100	20	10	35
A-20	20,000	125	30	30	15	20	35
A-12	12,000	100	25	20	10	30	35
A-8	8,000	80	25	20	10	30	35
A-6	6,000	60	25	20	8	30	35
B-1 and B-2 (single-family)	6,000	60	25	20	8	35	35
B-1 and B-2 (two-family)	8,000	60	25	20	8	35	35
B-2 (multi-family)	See formula in Section 30-14(a)	See formula in Section 30-14(a)	25	20	8	50	35
C-1	6,000	60	25	20	8	60	35
C-2	6,000	60	25	20	8	60	30
C-3	6,000	60	0	20	0	100	35
C-4	12,000	120	40	20	8	50	35
C-5	10,000	80	30	20	8	60	35
M-1	30,000	150	40	30	20	60	35
M-2	60,000	200	40	30	25	60	35
EI**	10,000	0	0	20***	20***	100%***	35****

Source: City of Cranston, 2024

Table 13-5. Residential Planned 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.

Smart growth strategies may play a larger role in protecting open space, agricultural resources, and minimizing overcrowding, especially in Western Cranston. "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 2012 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 is largely built-out but may attract new investment in the form of adaptive reuse, the development of existing substandard lots of record¹, as appropriate, mixed-use, and redevelopment proposals. Western Cranston is home to historic farms, protected open space and spacious residential developments. There is more undeveloped land in Western Cranston, but this is constrained due to open space protections, environmental constraints and the goals of maintaining its rural character and preserving scenic landscapes.

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.

Several affordable housing projects and major apartment proposals have been brought to and approved by the City Plan Commission and the City Council in recent years. Similar proposals have become common across the City and are expected to continue being developed due to the need for housing, especially affordable housing.

Land Use Policy 9.1 of the 2012 Comprehensive Plan and Land Use Policy 12 carried forward in this 2024 Plan seeks to protect and stabilize existing residential neighborhoods by increasing open space, improving roadway conditions, and making the zoning conform to existing uses. Policy 9.3 (and Land Use Policy 18 in the 2024 Plan) further call for preserving the existing density of established neighborhoods. The 2012 Plan “Zoning Conformity Analysis” Appendix A identifies parcels where the zoning is not aligned with existing neighborhoods. Appendix A is carried forward in this 2024 Plan.

13.5 Challenges and Opportunities

13.5.1 Challenges

Changes to City Character:

Cranston is unique. It is a mixture of urban, suburban and rural characteristics. It provides a variety of lifestyle choices for its residents. As discussed in the 2012 Comprehensive Plan, an ongoing challenge is connecting the disparate land uses within Cranston while preserving the unique qualities of each neighborhood. Balancing the demand for increased housing and development while protecting the density and character of existing neighborhoods is a persistent issue in highly developed Eastern Cranston. 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:

As previously noted in Table 13-2, 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.

¹ See RIGL 45-24-38. General Provisions—Substandard lots of record. Effective 1/1/2024.

Streetscape Limitations:

The reliance of Cranston on automobile infrastructure has led to car-oriented design. Discussions around accessibility and transit-oriented development have been ongoing since the previous Comprehensive Plan in 2012, 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.

*13.5.2 Opportunities***Diversification of Village Centers:**

As early as the 2012 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 2012 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.

Expanded Access for All Modes of Transportation:

Transit-oriented development is 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.