

# Natural Resource Protection Zoning

*This: 1) introduces Natural Resource Protection Zoning; 2) discusses why it is needed in Massachusetts; and 3) explains some of its mechanics.*

## What is Natural Resource Protection Zoning?

Natural Resource Protection Zoning (NRPZ) describes local zoning techniques designed to link land conservation to land development. It can take a number of forms, but its essence is to combine low underlying densities with compact patterns of development so significant areas of land are left undeveloped and available for agriculture, forestry, recreation, watershed, or wildlife habitat.

## Why Does Massachusetts Need NRPZ?

Typical zoning across Massachusetts, even in the smallest towns, prescribes the creation of houselots from every one, two, or three acres. Development according to this pattern rapidly consumes open land and compromises its natural resource value. Despite regional plans that stress maintenance of the state's "working landscapes," the implementation techniques successful in other states, such as cluster development, agricultural zoning, or transfer of development rights, do not work well here given these relatively high underlying densities. Because of its poor local zoning, the Commonwealth must rely too heavily on purchasing land at high costs to preserve it. The state needs new zoning models that are supported by its planning and zoning statutes.

## How NRPZ Works

States across the nation very effectively use zoning techniques to protect natural resources, especially in rural areas or areas of high environmental importance. Base development densities ranging from one unit of housing for every 10 to 160 acres of land are combined with zoning requirements that either: 1) ensure land is not divided into smaller units than can be viably farmed or managed for forestry; or 2) concentrate allowed development so the balance of the land may remain in current use (farming, recreation, wildlife habitat, etc.).

NRPZ emphasizes current, natural-resource-based uses over urbanized uses. Limited residential development is allowed, but the overall amount is much less than in other areas of a community; 5 or more acres per dwelling unit is the base density, with allowed units calculated by formula. If a residential subdivision is proposed (meaning houses on new streets), the easiest—by-right—development option is called open space design (OSD). In an OSD developed areas are carefully selected on the parcel so that other areas may remain undeveloped (10-35% may be developed, but at least 65-90% must be permanently preserved as open space). Great design flexibility is offered in the developable areas (e.g., shared drives, no minimum lot sizes, diversity of housing types). Earned density bonuses and/or transfers of development rights are available to increase the number of allowed dwelling units. A special permit is an option for development designs that differ from those described above; however, the proposal must meet the goals of the zoning district as least as well as an OSD plan.

This approach uses development, which cannot be prevented, to enable a town to preserve and maintain its open space, natural resources, and rural character to the extent legally permissible.