



Memorandum

To: South Burlington City Council
From: Jessie Baker, City Manager
Steve Locke, Deputy City Manager
Anna Dabrowski, Data Manager
Paul Conner, Director of Planning & Zoning
Brian Lowe, Assembly Theory
Date: April 2, 2025
Re: Growth Management Planning

This memo provides context on current South Burlington growth-related discussions and highlights potential questions for Councilors to consider at the April 10, 2025, Council Retreat. The purpose of the memo is to help facilitate a productive discussion and shared sense among the Council and City staff about how to best proceed with a growth management plan.

The memo is structured in four sections as follows:

- (i) Growth Management and Our FY25 Policy Priorities & Strategies
- (ii) Growth Management Definition and Process Values
- (iii) A proposal to undertake a Growth Management Plan, and to incorporate a potential UPenn Design Studio opportunity for the community into the broader City effort
- (iv) Questions, Considerations, and a Proposed Path Forward

I. Growth Management and Our FY25 Policy Priorities & Strategies

In our shared FY25 Policy Priorities & Strategies, you approved the following:

Growth: Intentionally understand and plan for growth in South Burlington	
	Key Questions for future consideration
	In partnership with the School District, convene City, School and Community discussions on long term growth, resource, affordability, and service delivery planning *"What do we want the City to be when we grow up?" *Is this an Committee with subcommittees? Is this leadership led? Community led?
	Develop demographic data of the last decades of growth and complete projections of where the City is going
	Outline the resource needs (staffing, capital needs, amenity needs) of both the City and School District given the demographic projections and interest in maintaining the quality of life standards our community expects

Growth: Intentionally understand and plan for growth in South Burlington	
	Develop revenue models to meet the resource needs
	Include the type of development and the impacts on the City
	Plan for the unexpected: *How do we plan for the impacts of climate change including natural disasters? *How do we plan for the end of business as we know it as we face climate change?

On March 6, 2025, you scheduled a special Council Retreat on April 10, 2025 and stated that you wanted to talk about a Growth Management Plan. And on March 17, 2025, you had an initial conversation about a partnership with a UPenn Design Studio.

II. Growth Management Definition and Process Values

Staff, with the onboarding of our new Data Manager and the support of Assembly Theory, put some time into outlining thoughts, challenges, and a proposed process below for your consideration.

Definition:

To start, we should have a shared definition of the goals of a “Growth Management Plan” for the City. Ideally this would be a shared goal with the City Council, Staff, and School District.

Our City Plan 2024 states that we want to be part of a thriving region, we have significant aspirations for city and school services, we want to play a regional leadership role, and we want to see growth in developed areas with open space preserved for the future.

Staff recommend that our future growth management conversations center being proactive in how we can thoughtfully plan for and shape anticipated growth over time. In other words, using the key principles of the City Plan, we recommend the growth management focus on building a more resilient¹ community.

This includes identifying needed infrastructure and service investments (for the City and Schools), being specific about the type of growth we want to see, and prioritizing our goals to have a vibrant downtown, be data driven, and build financial, human, and environmental sustainability. Finally, we do not see this as “a Plan” but rather an ongoing community conversation that sets shared expectations and tracks impact for the years to come.

¹ In this context, resiliency would mean:

- fiscal resiliency of the city, where new development brings in revenue proportional to its service costs.
- financial resiliency for households and businesses, where services and infrastructure allow them to thrive (eg, transportation options for residents and employees, sufficient wastewater capacity to grow, housing that is attainable, enough service providers to meet common health, wellness, and lifestyle needs, etc.)
- social resiliency, where we're building places and experiences where the community knows itself
- environmental resiliency- stormwater, open spaces, preservation of natural resources, etc.

Process Values:

Staff recommend that the process:

- Be oriented to the principles of City Plan 2024 and anticipated population, housing, business, and employment needs.
- Incorporate regional housing target allocations as identified through Acts 47 and 181.
- Build on the multitude of other planning efforts recently completed or underway.
- Have at its foundation that a key principle of the plan is to “be a leader and collaborator in the regional and statewide community” including to lead on the dual Vermont crises of addressing the impacts of climate change and curtailing the housing crisis.
- And acknowledge that because South Burlington is nestled between the State’s largest City, in close proximity to key institutions in the State (including UVM, UVMMC, Champlain College, the Burlington International Airport, Beta, OnLogic, and many other keys employers and institutions), and the beauty and natural resources of the Greens Mountains, it is likely that we will experience growth pressure by nature of our location for decades to come. We stand at a key position of providing a walkable, bikeable community, where neighbors can live, work, and play while having the smallest impact on our natural environment.

III. A proposal to undertake a Growth Management Plan, and to incorporate a potential UPenn Design Studio opportunity for the community into the broader City effort

Staff recommends the Council undertake a substantial, comprehensive Growth Management Plan. With support from staff and consulting services, and incorporating meaningful public engagement, the Growth Management Plan would include

- (a) An analysis of our historic growth and projections on growth scenarios through 2050
- (b) An analysis of capital and infrastructure investments (City, School, and partners such as GMT) needed to accommodate the anticipated growth
- (c) Scenarios for how our policy choices could shape the form of this development
- (d) Recommendations on policy actions that would build our resiliency as a community as we grow

Up-Front Data Analysis:

A productive growth management discussion would benefit from structured data analysis at the outset of the project to inform City and Council decision-making, and South Burlington has recently onboarded a Data Manager to begin this work.

To further define how this data analysis could unfold, the City team could first consolidate data about growth we have seen since 2010.

Second, the City team could leverage a subset of the sources (listed below for reference) to evaluate the impact or correlation of population growth with growth in development, the impacts of these types of growth have had on services and infrastructure, and what

that means for the need to scale the capacity and type of said services and infrastructure in the future.

- Building & zoning permits – Administrative Permits and Home Renovation & Additions Permit data
 - Number and type of new housing units (if not clear in the administrative permit data)
- School enrollment numbers (overall and by school facility)
- Additional square feet of new commercial or retail space created (annual)
- Electric utility or telecom connections
- Wastewater connection permits
- Water and wastewater allocation applications
- Housing market data – both housing costs and available units
- State gross receipts data (lags by at least a quarter)
- Vacancy rate (for owner-occupied and rental housing)
- Emergency service calls (particularly ambulance calls)
- Water / Wastewater overall demand levels
- Recreation class demand (and scholarship demand, if provided)
- Waste management (total volume, if this can be broken down by municipality by CSWD)
- Public transit ridership numbers
- Grand List growth
- Street, sidewalk, and shared use path infrastructure investments

Scenario Planning

Leveraging this data, the City Team, would model two potential growth scenarios for the future. These would not be meant to be predictive – rather, to help identify impacts, accommodations, and opportunities that come with future growth:

- Scenario #1 – Business as Usual: The City Plan anticipates annual growth rates of 1-1.5% (population) and 1.5-2% (housing). Using the mid-points (1.25% and 1.75%), if this continues, what are the impacts on services, tax base, community needs? How would we make local decisions to accommodate this assumed growth? How can we incorporate the interests of current residents into future growth planning?
- Scenario #2 – Grow Approach: The State has identified a regional housing target for Chittenden County under Acts 47 & 181. The draft Regional Plan proposes to allocate the majority of this target to the County's urban communities to build community resiliency. Based on this, what do these impact projections look like with a growth rate 1.75 percent and 2.3 percent. What is the impact if this is done in a more compact/dense development approach (taxable value/acre)? What tools would we need to achieve this level of growth? How could we best collaborate with the School District in this scenario?

Integrating the UPenn Design Studio Opportunity

City staff had a conversation with UPenn Professor Tom Daniels on March 28, 2025, to better understand how this opportunity could benefit South Burlington. Professor Daniels has deep roots in Vermont and a strong understanding of current zoning and Act 250 discussions, having directly supported the Natural Resource Board in 2023.

The Design Studio relies on second-year Masters students who, through the support of South Burlington City staff, gather internal City data and GIS maps to assess elements of future potential growth following a structured curriculum focus. Note that it is an academic study that intentionally does not engage the community.

City staff see value in working with the UPenn team – provided the Council supports staff time supporting this effort. The students can bring new ideas or approaches with them, and this can complement work that the City Team is already doing.

However, we want to be clear that the design studio would not substitute for developing a growth management plan. It is, above all, an academic exercise. The resulting presentation and written report can spark ideas in our community for future discussion but is not a replacement for a comprehensive growth management plan.

IV. Questions, Considerations, and a Proposed Path Forward

Staff considers that the Growth Management Plan can proceed with or without the UPenn Design Studio. If the Council supports staff time to support the UPenn Design Studio, we would confirm that initiative with Professor Daniels.

Because the City does not see the UPenn engagement as replacing a growth management plan, we want to propose a path forward for discussion and outline a series of additional questions and considerations for the Council.

Path Forward on Growth Management Plan

In addition to possibly engaging UPenn, the City would:

- Leverage its new data strategy capacity to focus on gathering relevant growth-related metrics for an initial, internal July discussion, consistent with the process laid out in the second section.
- Explore an RFP approach for a national firm like Urban 3 that “look[s] beneath the surface of municipal finances to unearth economic potential that can create sustainable futures for communities of all sizes.” Such an engagement would be informed by the City’s data collection as well.
- Continue to engage in ongoing obligations and opportunities – the housing targets established by Acts 47 & 181, the Shelburne Road study, and the like.
- Develop a plan jointly with the School District, potentially via a joint committee including members of the public, to share data and engage the community in a way that generates helpful, structured feedback about future needs and growth impacts.

Questions & Considerations for Council

UPenn-specific

- Should the City proceed with the UPenn design studio?
- Sequencing of the proposed path forward: Is the Council comfortable continuing conversations on a Growth Management Plan while the UPenn work is underway and understanding that that work may delay aspects of growth management planning ?

General approach

- Do we need to future define a “vision for shaping growth” beyond what is in the City Plan 2024?
- Do we have clear goals for a growth management plan?
- Should we analyze our recent history or jump right to potential solutions?
- How can we best engage the community in a healthy discussion about future growth?

Council Perspective

- Councilors have different views on this topic. Do we have sufficiently clear consensus to invest staff time on this initiative, for at least the next 6 months?

Thank you.