



# Every Acre Counts: the Newfound Watershed Master Plan

## A Future Defined by Community Visions and Watershed Demographics

By Steve Whitman, AICP

This article is the second in a series about *Every Acre Counts: The Newfound Watershed Master Plan*. A watershed is a natural basin that directs rain and snow melt to a common discharge point. In our case, the highlands of Alexandria, Bridgewater, Bristol, Groton and Hebron, as well as parts of Danbury, Orange, Plymouth, and a speck of Dorchester form the watershed boundary, with the Newfound River receiving the runoff. While each town must choose its own policies, watershed geography transcends municipal boundaries – water and wildlife do not recognize town authority! *Every Acre Counts* is designed to address the watershed ecosystem and provide local communities with the tools to craft a future that balances growth and conservation.

The future land use patterns of the towns around Newfound Lake will be decided by each community and the land use regulations that are in place to guide future growth. The resulting patterns of development have the potential to protect or greatly impact the health of Newfound Lake, the land within its 63,150-acre watershed and the local economy. These issues are the focus of *Every Acre Counts: The Newfound Watershed Master Plan*.

Five of the watershed communities (Alexandria, Bridgewater, Bristol, Groton, and Hebron) account for 93% of the watershed's area and 99% of its population. The watershed has a year-round population of more than 4,500 people distributed throughout the rural lands surrounding Newfound Lake, and the arrival of the seasonal population during the summer months results in a doubling of the population for that portion of the year. The watershed' population is also changing in many ways. The population is aging, living together in smaller numbers (which requires more housing units), and shifting toward more year-round residency.

From 1970 to 2005 the Newfound watershed's year-round population increased by 132%, an even greater rate of growth than within the region and the state. During this time family size declined and the number of single-parent households increased. The housing situation is further complicated by the high percentage of seasonal units (45%) and the increase in conversions from seasonal to year-round units.

Year-round and seasonal population growth create increasing pressure on the communities and natural resources within the watershed. Increasing population also creates opportunities for the local economy. We need to balance these and other issues to protect the long-term health and sustainability of the watershed for generations to come. ***Development in itself is not a threat: it is the location and design of development that is most important to the health of the watershed.*** This is where appropriate land use regulations can provide critical guidance.

Town Master Plans are documents used to guide land use changes as the population grows. The majority of local Master Plans in the watershed are fairly new, having been prepared since 2002. All of these plans provide a clear and consistent sense of what the community desires from a land use perspective, and stress the importance of natural resource protection and the need to balance the various forces of growth and development. For Master Plans to be effective it is critical that they are supported by regulations that will help make their visions a reality.

In contradiction to the vision of open space and natural resource protection described in local Master Plans, most local regulations support some form of a rural residential zoning with a minimum lot size of 1-2 acres and a minimum road frontage requirement of 150 to 200 feet. This is potentially a very suburban pattern of development, and not one that matches the vision statements for the communities. With roughly 70% of the

watershed open for possible building, there is a startling contrast between what we are accustomed to and what is allowable under current regulations.

*Every Acre Counts* will draw attention to these disconnects and provide guidance to local communities on how to manage growth to meet their visions of the future. *Every Acre Counts* will provide new approaches to handling stormwater (the greatest threat to land and water quality) and information demonstrating how environmental conservation brings sustainable economic benefit.

We hope that you will read these articles over the next few months to learn more about the research behind *Every Acre Counts*. To view completed reports and presentations, please visit the Newfound Lake Region Association web site ([www.Newfoundlake.org](http://www.Newfoundlake.org)) under the Watershed Master Plan tab. We hope to hear from you at public meetings or around town. You can also share your ideas with the NLRA at [info@Newfoundlake.org](mailto:info@Newfoundlake.org).

Author and affiliation: Steve Whitman, AICP is a planning consultant with the firm Jeffrey H. Taylor and Associates, an adjunct faculty member at Plymouth State University, and a resident of Plymouth, NH.



Mt. Cardigan, Bear Mtn. and Newfound Lake (courtesy Newfound Photography)