



**GREATER LOWELL
STRONGER TOGETHER**
2025-2030 COMPREHENSIVE
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY



2025 GREATER LOWELL ECONOMIC SUMMIT

THURSDAY • MARCH 20

**UKG, CROSSPOINT TOWERS
900 CHELMSFORD STREET, LOWELL**

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Introduction

Project Purpose

The Greater Lowell Region is producing an updated Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) in 2025. This strategy-driven plan for regional economic development will be a key enabler, serving as a guide toward the region becoming more resilient, equitable and competitive. For more information, visit <https://www.nmcog.org/ceds>

What is a Build Session?

As part of the 2025 Greater Lowell Economic Summit, [Northern Middlesex Council of Governments \(NMCOG\)](#) and [Fourth Economy](#) are hosting a series of Build Sessions. A Build Session is an interactive workshop designed to brainstorm, prioritize, and build solutions. Some refer to sessions like these as “working sessions” or “focus groups.” We call them Build Sessions to emphasize the focus on moving past talking about opportunities or issues and toward building actions. Through this process, we engage stakeholders who know key issues best and are likely to be involved in future implementation efforts. These interactive, human-centered sessions are critical in developing realistic actions and gaining buy-in from key stakeholders. You can [learn more about the Build Session process here](#).

Build Session Topics

	Resilient Places and Networks	Economy 2.0: The new Paradigm	Regional Collaboration on Wicked Problems
	8 am - 10 am	10 am - Noon	1 pm - 3 pm
Business Engagement and Development	Future of Business Parks	LINC and Emerging Industries	Business Attraction and Retention
Strong Places and Towns	Downtown Lowell	Town, City, and Neighborhood Main Streets	Arts, Culture, and Outdoor Recreation
Municipal Capacity	Rural and Small-Town Economies	Leveraging State Funding, including LEADS	Infrastructure: Water, Sewer, Energy
Worker and Resident Support	Cars, Transit, and Active Transportation	Workforce Development	The Intersection of Economy and Housing

Business Engagement and Development

The region is in the midst of a major economic opportunity, anchored by a diverse industry mix and attractive, developable sites that can catalyze innovation and growth. Highlighted by the widely publicized LINC project, and supplemented by redevelopment concepts such as the Hamilton Canal Innovation District, Ayer's City Industrial Park Plan, and multiple commercial and industrial zones in towns surrounding Lowell, the region has ample room to accommodate commercial and industrial growth. These assets and their potential pair well with the region's existing industry strengths and emerging sectors.

For example, existing industry sector strengths include Computer and Electronic Product Manufacturing, Life Sciences/Biotech, Engineering, and Technology sectors which employ 23,272 workers – making up 1 in 6 workers in the Greater Lowell region. These sectors represent areas of strategic growth because of overall employment and industry specialization, concentration of related industries, and opportunities for employment and GDP growth. These sectors are concentrated in major regional industries like Manufacturing, Information, and Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services.

Still, to realize this economic opportunity, intentionally aligning economic development services is essential. Businesses choose to locate in areas with competitive economies, specialized incentives, and strong talent pools. Between the region's various economic development and community organizations, additional collaboration and role clarification is needed to adequately attract new businesses, engage existing ones, and build a toolkit to grow the regional economy.

Session Facts

8:00am - Future of Business Parks: Similar to national trends, many of the region's traditional office, business, and industrial parks have seen disinvestment in recent decades. To modernize these assets and increase their economic value to the region, investments are needed to update infrastructure, create high-quality, in-demand facilities, and bring tenants back to these economic engines. Areas such as [Ayer's City Industrial Park](#), [Chelmsford Crossroads at Route 129](#), [priority development sites in Billerica](#), [Westford Technology Park](#), and other industrial and office parks across the region are struggling to find the highest and best use for vacant or underutilized facilities.

10:00am - LINC and Emerging Industries: Two ongoing projects offer the opportunity for catalytic economic growth in the Greater Lowell region. First, the [Lowell Innovation Network Corridor \(LINC\)](#), an [\\$800 million project](#) backed by ample state support, will bring an unprecedented volume of commerce and mixed-use residential offerings to the heart of Lowell, alongside major employers and R&D activities. Complementing this development is the [Hamilton Canal Innovation District Plan](#), which aims to revitalize transit-oriented, canalside property in Lowell for both commercial and residential uses, with an estimated 2 million square feet of new development across industrial, commercial, and residential uses. These projects both align well with the region's emerging and legacy industries. Industries like Life Sciences/Biotech,

Engineering, Technology, Information, and Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services will all thrive with an influx of new businesses and R&D efforts within these key sites. Paired with state incentives related to life sciences, manufacturing, and defense, there is a major opportunity to leverage these developments as catalytic not just for Lowell, but for the region as a whole.

1:00pm - Business Attraction and Retention: The NMCOG region lacks standardized economic development services specifically related to industry cluster development, site selection, business attraction, and business retention and expansion (BRE). While [NMCOG](#) handles economic development planning efforts, [Middlesex 3](#) serves as the regional economic development organization (REDO) and excels in convening key civic officials to discuss economic issues, and others, like [The Lowell Plan](#), work in the space of local development, gaps remain in industry engagement, business attraction, and commercial growth. Chambers of Commerce and local municipal economic development offices also serve important roles assisting and attracting businesses. Additional support is still needed to help grow the volume of businesses and jobs in the region, increasing local tax bases, and to sustain the regional economy.

Session Focus: How Might We...

1. **Future of Business Parks:** How might we revitalize the region's commercial and industrial parks to jumpstart redevelopment opportunities and economic growth?
2. **LINC and Emerging Industries:** How might we build attractive commercial and industrial assets that grow our existing and emerging industry clusters?
3. **Business Attraction and Retention:** How might we better collaborate as a region to attract and engage key businesses?

Strong Places and Towns

In modern economic development, quality of life and place are key determinants in where talent and businesses choose to locate and spend their life, money, and time. The NMCOCG region offers a strong quality of life, with many charming New England towns and the arts, culture, and restaurant scene. Many local businesses, including restaurants, retail, and other services make up the majority of this economy and create a unique identity for the region. Gaps remain, including amenities in town and neighborhood centers that serve both residents and workers. Critically, downtown Lowell is a hub and anchor to the region, and it has many opportunities that might enhance quality of life to explore, including a full service hotel and increased nightlife options. Each town, village, or neighborhood center plays a different but important role. To fully leverage the region's economic opportunities, a holistic approach is needed to create attractive places to live, work, and play throughout the region.

Session Facts

8:00am - Downtown Lowell: Data suggests that Lowell's residents struggle in a variety of key economic indicators, such as wages, employment, education, mental health outcomes, and even life expectancy. These realities are often evident in Lowell's downtown, where vacancy and safety issues deter investment, creating a negative feedback loop that results in a lack of progress in the area. As the region's core urban center, increased opportunities for prosperity and community health in Downtown Lowell are paramount. The re-emergence of the area as an economic engine can yield stronger socioeconomic outcomes for city residents and help to catalyze broader regional impacts.

10:00am - Town, City, and Neighborhood Main Streets: Between Lowell's numerous neighborhood centers and the Main Street offerings of the region's smaller municipalities, small businesses such as restaurants, entertainment venues, and personal service providers are a key component of the region's economy. However, more services are needed to support the creation and sustainability of these businesses which contribute to local spending and overall community vibrancy. Additional programmatic offerings could include the creation of a local business incubator, additional local grants for business beautification, infrastructure, and technological upgrades, and more hands-on technical assistance for small business owners. Programming could also target the creation or expansion of a development incubator and accelerator targeting traditionally-underserved entrepreneurs, supporting small business in government procurement efforts, and building connection points between cultural organizations and workforce development partners.

1:00pm - Arts, Culture, and Outdoor Recreation: In the eyes of people who live, work, and visit, Lowell is a historic centerpiece of Massachusetts and New England as a whole. Anchored by the Lowell National Historic Park as a major attraction, the NMCOCG region's history and culture is a key part of its identity. This sentiment is backed by numerous cultural experiences in Lowell and throughout the region, including museums, festivals, theaters, and art venues such as [Western Avenue Studios](#), one of the largest artist communities in America. NMCOCG also has ample

farmland and outdoor assets that drive an agricultural economy and eco-tourism. Assets such as beloved local farms, historic mills in every community, recreational access to the Concord River, Nashoba Valley Ski Area, trails along the Merrimack, Concord, and Nashua Rivers, and the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail—just to name a few—are attractive to residents and tourists alike. These assets and their corresponding experiences add to the region’s identity as a high-quality area to live outside of Boston. However, these gems aren’t always well-leveraged for economic development, and some are not well known outside the region.

Session Focus: How Might We...

1. **Downtown Lowell:** How might we activate Downtown Lowell to improve quality of life and catalyze broader economic improvements in the area?
2. **Town, City, and Neighborhood Main Streets:** How might we best support the region’s numerous small businesses and main streets?
3. **Arts, Culture, and Outdoor Recreation:** How might we leverage the area’s ample outdoor, arts, and culture assets that matches the unique identity of the region?

Municipal Capacity

Through strong economic development and community-level planning efforts, engagement with existing industry, and initiatives that aim to revitalize specific commercial corridors, the NMCOC region pairs robust state support for economic growth with a unique, regional approach to development. Still, municipalities may lack some tools and resources that could better support their local economic goals. Economic development outcomes vary at the local level, with many municipalities struggling to find the capacity to take on a right-sized approach for their community. No topic is more emblematic of this issue than local and regional infrastructure. Municipalities within the region can struggle to develop and modernize the infrastructure necessary to attract new development, leaving many without a clear or resilient plan for growth. Moving forward, this CEDS is a critical junction to expand and standardize the region's economic development tools and capacity, with the state government offering an unprecedented opportunity for commercial growth through the Mass Leads Act investment (the State's economic development bill signed into law in November 2024).

Session Facts

8:00am - Rural and Small-Town Economies: The needs of municipalities in the region range widely, with urban, suburban, and rural communities needing vastly different investments and programs to catalyze unique economic development outcomes. While some municipalities have aspirations for increased development and population growth, others are against large-scale shifts to their community characteristics and built environment. However, communities large and small have in common the need for increased economic activity to support municipal finances and quality of life. Small communities often need to support and nurture restaurants and retail, agri-tourism, extraction industries, warehouses and logistics, or other specialized industries unique to them. This CEDS must lay the groundwork for how these communities can embed economic development into their programming in a way that works for them.

10:00am - Leveraging State Funding, Including Leads : Massachusetts offers one of the country's most robust packages of state-level programs related to economic, community, housing, and infrastructure development. In total, over 70 unique programs are available for economic development organizations, local governments, businesses, and developers to access to their benefit. Through the recent passage of the [Mass Leads Act](#) (and bill [summary](#)), Massachusetts is pouring an unprecedented volume of capital into new investments. Specific programs that may directly benefit NMCOC include expansions to the MassWorks Infrastructure Program, Mass Impact, Rural Development Fund, Local Economic Development Grants, and incentives relevant to life sciences and advanced manufacturing.

1:00pm - Infrastructure: Water, Sewer, Energy: Regional infrastructure is aging – in some cases over 100 years old – and cannot accommodate new development opportunities in most cases. Specifically, wastewater and stormwater infrastructure is outdated and inadequate in many locations, with wastewater treatment at capacity or non-existent. Some municipalities are

concerned with clean water access. Finally, the electricity grid's capacity or cost of electricity has been identified as possible limiting factors for some key energy-intensive industries. Municipalities lack the funding and capacity to update infrastructure en masse, limiting the growth potential of the region as a whole. Many municipal leaders do not see a path forward for not only accommodating new developments, but maintaining existing ones.

Session Focus: How Might We...

1. **Rural and Small-Town Economies:** How might we create economic development tools and programs that work for all municipalities?
2. **Leveraging State Funding, Including Leads:** How might we better position the region to receive state funding relevant to economic development, infrastructure, housing, and more?
3. **Infrastructure: Water, Sewer, Energy:** How might we ensure the region's infrastructure is adequate to attract and accommodate new developments, businesses, and residents?

Worker and Resident Support

The Northern Middlesex region has a variety of programs and services that aim to support the quality of life, lifestyle, and employment opportunities of local residents. However, macroeconomic factors are shifting the needs of regional residents, especially in housing, transportation, and workforce development. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a decrease in regional transit offerings, which have only recently returned to their pre-pandemic levels after five years—falling short of what younger generations of residents or firms expect in a modern economy. There is a regional increase in jobs that require strong technical skills and training—a reality that regional and statewide workforce development systems are still catching up to. And, like many regions nationwide, NMCOG suffers from an existing and projected housing shortage, with a lack of housing choice for the modern workforce needed to support the region’s economy. To intervene on these trends, intentional action is needed from regional and local leaders that can influence policy, programming, and collaboration to solve these complex problems.

Session Facts

8:00am - Cars, Transit, and Active Transportation: Through the Lowell Regional Transit Authority (LRTA), the MBTA, and local transportation providers such as UMass Lowell, the NMCOG region has a strong base of public transit and mobility. However, limitations in service headways and hours, along with coordination between regional neighboring systems such as MBTA Commuter Rail, MeVa and the Nashua Transit System, create gaps in the transportation network. While the NMCOG region is well connected to the Merrimack Valley region through MeVa, there are notable gaps in connections to Nashua and southern New Hampshire to the north, and to MART communities to the west, limiting regional access.

Some gaps are internal, such as walkability between neighborhoods and town centers, while others are external but critical for creating connections between the Greater Lowell region and Greater Boston. Internally, there are gaps in crosstown connectivity, with all LRTA routes terminating at the Kennedy Center, forcing riders to transfer for crosstown trips. Given that most LRTA services operate at frequencies of once per hour, these transfers can require riders to wait up to an hour for a connection — making the system impractical for many trips and limiting access for those without a car. Fixed-route service largely ends by 7:00 PM impacting workers with evening shifts, including service sector employees, and limits the transit system's usefulness for later evening trips. Furthermore, low frequencies limit options for riders making the system impractical for riders who do not have access to a car. The system’s low frequencies reduce resilience to delays, increasing the risk of missed connections.

Another critical missing link is between residents of central Lowell neighborhoods, many of whom do not own private vehicles, and job opportunities that are dispersed throughout the region and neighboring regions. The City of Lowell's GoLowell Complete Streets Plan highlights these gaps and recommends piloting an east-west crosstown route to improve connectivity. In addition to these service limitations, pedestrian infrastructure — essential for beginning and ending of

virtually every transit trip – is often lacking. NMCOG’s 2024 Bus Stop Inventory found that nearly a quarter (23%) of LRTA bus stops lack sidewalk connections, limiting safe and convenient access to transit. These gaps limit the ability of workers, families, and tourists from efficiently moving throughout the region, hindering the live-work nature and overall quality of life of the region. The network provides limited choice for those who wish to use modes of transportation besides private vehicles. Increased connectivity between the MBTA and LRTA, MART, Nashua and southern New Hampshire transit, as well as first- and last-mile connections and improved biking and walking infrastructure are essential to progress in regional mobility.

10:00am - Workforce Development: Currently, 70% of residents are employed outside of the region, with the majority of this out-flow going to the Greater Boston Region. This reality is due to labor dynamics: workers leave the region to access knowledge economy jobs, which pay better wages and require more education. These sectors, including life sciences, advanced manufacturing, technology-related jobs, financial services, and more, are clustered in Boston and its suburbs, and attract the region’s more educated workers. Meanwhile, the region’s workers with less education fill many of the locally available jobs. This creates a dynamic in which many people are underemployed despite living in a region with plentiful opportunity. This underemployed population is concentrated in sections of central Lowell.

To shift this dynamic, robust workforce development programming is needed to align local residents with the growing presence of higher-wage work in the region—which might call for not only educational programming, but cultural sensitivity, transportation connections, childcare, or the breaking down of other barriers. In addition, the region’s strong network of workforce training and educational institutions could be even better aligned with the needs of growing industries. The LINC project is a strong example of connecting local residents with increased economic opportunity through access to jobs that pay higher wages and housing options.

1:00pm - The Intersection of Economy and Housing: Similar to many regions throughout New England, the NMCOG region suffers from an overall housing shortage, which is expected to continue in the coming decade if existing conditions do not change. Housing options and housing affordable to workers support economic development and job growth. There is a projected gap of ~8,500 units by 2035 that the region currently does not have the capacity to develop. Housing diversity in the region is also limited in terms of typology, affordability, and options for various life stages. This reality is dictated by numerous factors, including development costs, local zoning, and rising home values. This lack of housing in the region limits opportunities for business growth across the region due to difficulties attracting or retaining workers at wages comparable to other areas with lower cost of living. While local initiatives including zoning compliant with M.G.L. 40A, Section 3, the Multi-Family Zoning Requirement for MBTA Communities may address some housing demand, further actions will be needed to supply the next generation of the region’s workforce with the types of housing that meets their needs at a price they can afford.

Session Focus: How Might We...

1. **Cars, Transit, and Active Transportation:** How might we better align regional transportation assets with the daily needs of workers?
2. **Workforce Development:** How might we ensure that local residents are set up with a pathway to high-quality, higher-wage jobs in the region?
3. **The Intersection of Economy and Housing:** How might we minimize the region's housing shortage to accommodate our region's existing and future workforce?