

Integrating Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Into Local Government Planning

Examples, Recommendations, and Resources for U.S. Towns and Counties

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This report serves as a practical guide for planners and partners to incorporate wildlife habitat connectivity into local land use planning. It includes sample policy and ordinance language from communities across the country, links to relevant planning and technical resources, and case studies that highlight implementation approaches. The report also compiles recommendations and best practices to support local decision-making.

Why Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Matters for Land Use Planning

Planners across the United States are navigating unprecedented challenges: balancing growing development pressures, public expectations for livability and sustainability, and the need to preserve vital ecosystems. One increasingly essential dimension of this work is planning for wildlife habitat connectivity, the unimpeded movement of species and the flow of natural processes that sustain life on Earth.

Local governments have land use authority across nearly two-thirds of land in the U.S. and have a key role to play in preserving wildlife habitat connectivity. Town and county planners are well-positioned to maintain healthy ecosystems and resilient communities by embedding habitat connectivity into long-range plans, zoning, and development review to guide growth, conserve rural landscapes, and protect critical resources.

Habitat connectivity planning provides benefits that reach beyond wildlife. It's a smart growth strategy that supports open space networks, green infrastructure, water quality, recreation, and rural character. Further, it has appeal across a broad political spectrum. Most people value wildlife and support strategic approaches that yield cost savings through long-term resource conservation. Despite benefits, many local governments lack explicit policies to conserve natural resources and habitat connectivity.

Recommendations for Local Government Action

The report provides examples from across the nation of how planners are using existing frameworks to prioritize habitat connectivity through regulatory and incentive-based tools.

Basic tenets:

- **Know where key wildlife habitat exists** by undertaking mapping or using partner or agency mapping.
- **Build where appropriate** by clustering development and incentivizing construction in town centers.
- **Protect wildlife habitat and movement** by limiting density, development, and activities in key habitat areas, securing or expanding protected open spaces, and requiring buffers around natural resources.

Local governments can take action to address wildlife habitat connectivity in land use planning:

- Establish a regional vision and approach for maintaining open space and natural resource functions for connectivity.
- Map and identify high-quality wildlife habitat and connectivity areas.
- Establish a funding source to support open space and wildlife corridor planning and protection.
- Include wildlife habitat connectivity in comprehensive plan and functional plan goals, objectives, and policies.
- Integrate and align comprehensive plan goals with land use regulations and incentives that support connectivity.
- Use clear regulations and incentives throughout zoning, subdivision regulations, and development standards.
- Use tools like open space acquisition and protection, overlay zones, conservation design, cluster development, setbacks and buffers, density bonuses, purchase/transfer of development rights, project-level environmental impact review, and the addition of wildlife crossing structures to transportation infrastructure.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE AND PARTNER ACTIONS	
Enact State Legislation to Embed Connectivity in Local Land Use Policy States can be critical enablers of local habitat connectivity planning. Adopt or strengthen statutory and regulatory requirements that empower or require local governments to include wildlife habitat connectivity and natural resources conservation in land use plans, zoning ordinances, and development review processes.	Provide Financial and Technical Support Conserving habitat connectivity is a complex and cross-jurisdictional effort, and most communities lack the resources to engage effectively. Offer funding, grant programs, technical assistance, and training to help local planners integrate connectivity into land use decisions and implement conservation strategies on the ground.
Map and Identify Connectivity Areas Mapping is an important step to show where and why habitat connectivity should be maintained in order to guide planning and development. Identify, map, and designate important wildlife habitat, natural resources, and key linkage areas at a regional and local scale. Agencies and partners can facilitate cross-jurisdictional coordination and data sharing.	Coordinate Cross-Boundary Guidance and Planning State and regional agencies should prioritize and facilitate regional approaches to conserve habitat connectivity. For consistency across local government and agency jurisdictions, facilitate collaboration and provide standardized mapping, policy integration, and implementation guidelines.

A Call to Action

As the U.S. population and development expand, conserving natural resources and habitat connectivity depends on local government leadership. Local governments are uniquely positioned to shape the landscape for wildlife and people through thoughtful planning, regulatory innovation, and proactive conservation. This report is a call to action to integrate wildlife habitat connectivity into land use decision-making and it provides tools, examples, and policy language to help communities across the U.S. conserve critical natural resources, open spaces, and habitat connectivity for current and future generations.

View and download the report at:
largelandscapes.org/local-planning



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